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STUDIES IN BROWNING

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BY

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TO

MY WIFE

PREFACE

THE general scope of this volume may be gathered from its title, taken together with the subjects of the several chapters. It is not intended to be in any sense exhaustive, but rather preparatory to further study and profounder research on the part of the reader.

My object has been to introduce Browning to those to whom he is little more than a name, and to give them samples of the intellectual wealth which that name represents. And if any are led by these *Studies* to interest themselves in this greatest poet of the last century, it will be to me a source of gratification and a cause for sincere thankfulness.

Some of the chapters appeared origi-

nally in *Great Thoughts*, and I have pleasure in acknowledging the kindness of the Editor and Proprietors of that Journal in allowing me to republish them.

The edition of Browning's *Works*, to which the various references are made in the footnotes, is that issued in two volumes by Messrs. Smith, Elder, & Co., from whom permission has been obtained to quote from those poems, the copyright of which has not yet expired.

J. F.

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INTRODUCTORY

INTRODUCTORY

'To Browning's work I may apply, without conscious impertinence, the noble words spoken of the Apollo Belvidere: "Go and study it; and if you see nothing to captivate you, go again; go until you find it, for be assured it is there."'

DAWSON in 'The Makers of Modern English.'

THAT Browning is worthy of study, that indeed he *demands* it, will not be denied by any who possess even a slight acquaintance with his writings. No poet of our time has a greater claim upon us in this respect than he. You do not read him as you read some others of his kind—though by far his inferiors—for the sake of entertainment or amusement, or

simply to pass an idle hour. He is not only a poet, but also a philosopher, and his poetry is inseparable from his philosophy. Other poets you may *read*; Browning you must *study*.

It is not necessary to multiply testimonies which indicate the need of this, though it would be easy to do so. Suffice it to refer to one story only, recounted with evident humorous appreciation by the poet himself. On his introduction to the Chinese ambassador, as a 'brother poet,' he asked that dignitary what kind of poetic expression he particularly affected. The great man deliberated, and then replied that his poetry might be defined as 'enigmatic.' Browning at once admitted his fraternal kinship. That which he thus playfully recognized has been asserted over and over again by others, in varying moods, and sometimes unfortunately in language more forcible than polite.

But from the vision of the diligent

student, in many instances at least, the obscurity of the poet passes away, and in its place there appear a beauty and a depth of thought, the apprehension of which will amply repay him for all his pains. The following is, I venture to think, a typical experience: 'I was at first strongly repelled by the apparent harshness and unintelligibility of Browning's poems, but persevered—chiefly, it must be confessed, from the dislike to be beaten—until I first understood, then admired, and at last revelled in unimagined wealth.'[1]

Then, not only is it true that the philosophical character of Browning's poems necessitates study in order to their comprehension in any adequate degree, but the subjects of which they treat are such as to fascinate any really studious mind. His philosophy is not an abstract thing, dealing only in vague generalities, spinning theories according to the mood of the

[1] Dr. Monro Gibson.

poet philosopher himself—theories which have no immediate connexion with any pressing facts. No! His philosophy is instinct with life, luminous with a great light, which it sheds profusely on the problems which confront equally the recluse in his retirement and 'the man in the street.' Mrs. Sutherland Orr expresses what I have in my mind when she says: 'His treatment of visible and of invisible realities constitutes him respectively a dramatic and a metaphysical poet; but as the two kinds of reality are inseparable in human life, so are the corresponding qualities inseparable in Mr. Browning's work. The dramatic activity of his genius always includes the metaphysical. His genius always shows itself as dramatic and metaphysical at the same time.' These statements undoubtedly represent the facts, and it is this remarkable and rare combination of qualities that gives to Browning a unique place among his contemporaries.

There is one other principal reason why he deserves a more thorough and a more constant attention than we are accustomed to give to many wooers of his muse, and it is to be found in his convictions concerning God and immortality, which reveal themselves times without number in the course of his works. Indeed, it has been said that 'Faith in God and Belief in Immortality were his sources of inspiration.' It is not possible to say that of all our poets—perhaps not of any in the same degree as of him. One other great poet of the Victorian age, Tennyson, may, I suppose, be very properly described as a religious poet. He, too, 'treats of the eternal mysteries of God and the universe, and the awful problems of life and death'; but where Tennyson whispers, or speaks with bated breath, Browning sends forth a clear, distinct, ringing voice—where the former 'faintly trusts,' the latter avows a confidence which nought can disturb, and

which inspires faith in the more timid and halting of his fellows around him. What Browning makes the Pope say in 'The Ring and the Book,'[1] he might have said of himself with perfect truthfulness:

> Never I miss footing in the maze,
> No,—I have light nor fear the dark at all.

This is the man whom we gladly elect to be our teacher.

[1] Line 1,659.

I

CONCERNING GOD

I

CONCERNING GOD

'There 's heaven above, and night by night
I look right through its gorgeous roof;
No suns and moons though e'er so bright
Avail to stop me; splendour-proof
I keep the broods of stars aloof:
For I intend to get to God,
For 'tis to God I speed so fast,
For in God's breast, my own abode,
Those shoals of dazzling glory passed,
I lay my spirit down at last.'

'Johannes Agricola in Meditation.'

IN these words we have set forth one of the chief tendencies of Browning's poetry, one of its supreme aims—to bring the human soul into the presence of God. With this end in view, he would fain give

to us some true conception of the nature and attributes of the Divine Being. Not that he does this in any formal, systematic way: that would be inconsistent with the genius of the poetic art. He is not, in any technical sense, a theologian. He does not paint a perfect picture, carefully filling in the lights and shades (if one may speak of 'shades' in the portrayal of Him in whom 'there is no darkness at all'), and then, having completed it, say, 'This is He!' No. He shows us here and there glimpses of Him whom 'he calls God, and fools call Nature,' until, having looked at every phase of His being and character, we feel that we have seen enough, and more than enough, to rest our hearts.

The theistic teaching of our poet is based upon the needs that reveal themselves in man's nature. Principal Caird affirms that 'the religious impulse, the aspiration after God and after union with Him as the soul's true life, is grounded in

the very nature of man as a rational and spiritual being. Something more than the mediation of nature and of other finite minds is needed in order to the unfolding of the latent content of my spiritual nature. My life as a rational and spiritual being would be impossible, and my relations to nature and society would be baseless, save on the presupposition of an infinite and absolute intelligence on which all finite thought and being rest.'

And so Browning does not set himself in any sense to prove that God *is*. He proceeds on the assumption that *He must be*. Man is incomplete without Him. He is the necessary complement of our being. The poet discerns the naturalness of the longing expressed by the Psalmist: 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God.'

So convinced is he of the need of God to supplement the imperfection of man's nature, to fill up the measure of his

capacity, that even in his earliest poem he gives us a terrible picture of one who is God-forsaken:

> My powers were greater: as some temple seemed
> My soul, where nought is changed and incense rolls
> Around the altar, only God is gone
> And some dark spirit sitteth in His seat.[1]

How God is apprehended, and how much of Him is known to men, the poet does not say, because he cannot. But of the fact itself—the fact of God's knowableness—he has no doubt at all. Agnosticism, in the sense in which some of our modern philosophers rejoice to use the word, has no place in his theory of the unseen. It is true that you cannot apply material methods to the cognition of the spiritual, that you cannot know God in the same way as you know the solid earth on which you tread, and yet the knowledge may be equally real and certain;

[1] 'Pauline,' vol. i. 8.

Concerning God

I knew, I felt, (perception unexpressed,
Uncomprehended by our narrow thought,
But somehow felt and known in every shift
And change in the spirit,—nay, in every pore
Of the body, even,)—what God is, what we are,
What life is—how God tastes an infinite joy
In infinite ways—one everlasting bliss,
From whom all being emanates, all power
Proceeds . . .[1]

Nowhere, perhaps, are man's knowledge of God and God's incomprehensibility by man (for, in the spiritual realm, these two are not exclusives — the paradox does exist and represent the actual truth) more clearly indicated than in the following beautiful passage:

O Thou,—as represented here to me
In such conception as my soul allows,—
Under Thy measureless, my atom width !—
Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points
Picked out of the immensity of sky,
To reunite there, be our heaven for earth,
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?
Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,—

---

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 69.

> There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)
> In the absolute immensity, the whole
> Appreciable solely by Thyself,—
> Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
> To littleness that suits his faculty,
> In the degree appreciable too . . .[1]

Professor Henry Jones, in discussing 'Browning's Place in English Poetry,' at the same time compares and contrasts him with Shelley and Wordsworth. The earlier poets, he says, were 'the poets of Nature,' Browning was 'the poet of the human soul.' That is true. 'And yet he does not break away from his predecessors. His kinship with them, in that he recognizes the presence of God in nature, is everywhere evident.' In proof of this, Professor Jones quotes one passage, 'scarcely to be surpassed by any of our poets, as indicative of his power of dealing with the supernaturalism of nature'—the passage which closes with these suggestive words:

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Pope'), vol. ii. 234.

> Thus He dwells in all,
> From life's minute beginnings, up at last
> To man—the consummation of this scheme
> Of being, the completion of this sphere
> Of life.[1]

The point that is here emphasized, and which appears again and again as an article of the poet's creed, is the immanence of God in all His works. He is not transcendent merely, an uncreated essence apart altogether from His creatures, but 'in Him we,' and all things else, 'live and move and have our being.' 'His presence fills our earth:'

> He glows above
> With scarce an intervention, presses close
> And palpitatingly, His soul o'er ours:
> We feel Him, nor by painful reason know!
> The everlasting minute of creation
> Is felt there; now it is, as it was then;
> All changes at His instantaneous will,
> Not by the operation of a law
> Whose maker is elsewhere at other work.
> His hand is still engaged upon His world—
> Man's praise can forward it, man's prayer suspend,
> For is not God all-mighty? To recast

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 69.

The world, erase old things and make them new,
What costs it Him? So, man breathes nobly there.[1]

The same truth is expressed by Fust as he 'pours forth his soul in an impassioned utterance, half soliloquy, half prayer,' which is 'a tribute of adoration to that Absolute of Creative Knowledge, the law of which he has obeyed':

O Thou, the one force in the whole variation
  Of visible nature,—at work—do I doubt?—
From Thy first to our last, in perpetual creation—
  A film hides us from Thee—'twixt inside and out,
A film, on this earth where Thou bringest about
New marvels, new forms of the glorious, the gracious,
  We bow to, we bless for: no star bursts heaven's dome
But Thy finger impels it, no weed peeps audacious
  Earth's clay-floor from out, but Thy finger makes room
For one world's-want the more in Thy Cosmos.[2]

Even so, invariably,

> We find great things are made of little things,
> And little things go lessening till at last
> Comes God behind them.[3]

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[1] 'Luria,' vol. i. 463.
[2] 'Fust and his Friends,' vol. ii. 740.
[3] 'Mr. Sludge, "the Medium,"' vol. i. 618.

Concerning God

But besides this general teaching in reference to the revelation of God in His works, there are, in Browning's poetry, many sidelights on the Divine Character as it is in itself and in its relationship to the world of men and things. 'Taken as a whole,' says Dr. Edward Berdoe, 'Browning's conception of God does not differ from that of the great teachers of Christianity and the apologists of theism, like Kant.' If this be true, there cannot be the slightest doubt that Browning believed in a personal God, in the sense in which that phrase is understood by the most exact philosophical thinkers. And consequently, here and there throughout the poems, we have suggestions of those attributes which are essentially inherent in such a Being.

For example, without discussing what is meant precisely by the *Omnipotence* of God, what could more tersely indicate for

us the vastness of His might than the words in 'Pompilia'?—

> Reflect that God, who makes the storm desist,
> Can make an angry violent heart subside.[1]

Or, if we take the attribute of *Omniscience*, how much significance is packed into the phrases with which Caponsacchi, the priest, asseverated his freedom from any moral blameworthiness when he held himself 'bound to help weak innocence'! His action was performed in the clearest light:

> With the midday blaze of truth above,
> The unlidded eye of God awake, aware;[2]

that Eye of which it is said elsewhere that it is

> over all,
> And each, to mark the minute's deed, word, thought,
> As worthy of reward or punishment.[3]

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[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Pompilia'), vol. ii. 161.
[2] Ibid. ('The Other Half-Rome'), vol. ii. 59.
[3] 'Ferishtah's Fancies' ('Plot-Culture'), vol. ii. 673.

Concerning God

Lotze, in his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Religion*, has a very helpful section on *Unchangeableness* as an attribute of the Deity. 'A God,' he says, 'who should be without changeable inner states, for ever perfectly self-identical, would answer to no religious need . . . and, therefore, by His "unchangeableness" nothing further is meant than the consistency with which all these inner states proceed from a nature that remains the same.' In the light of such words as these, we see the meaning and the beauty of the lines of 'Abt Vogler,' the musician, after he has uttered his lament:

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;

. . . . . .

Therefore to whom turn I but to Thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and maker, Thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from Thee, who art ever the same?
Doubt that Thy power can fill the heart that Thy power expands?

There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall
live as before;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much
good more;
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect
round.[1]

Closely akin to this is the *Eternity* of the Divine Being, so quaintly set forth in 'Fifine at the Fair,' in the picture of 'Ignorance surmising, in the mouth of peasant lad or lass':

I heard my father say he understood it was
A building, people built as soon as earth was made
Almost, because they might forget (they were afraid)
Earth did not make itself, but came of Somebody.
They laboured that their work might last, and show
thereby
He stays, while we and earth and all things come
and go.
Come whence? Go whither? That, when come and
gone, we know
Perhaps, but not while earth and all things need our
best
Attention: we must wait and die to know the rest.
Ask, if that's true, what use in setting up the pile?
To make one fear and hope: remind us, all the while
We come and go, outside there's Somebody that stays.[2]

[1] Vol. i. 579. [2] Vol. ii. 364.

There is, however, another attribute of God upon which Browning seemed always to delight to dwell—though, possibly, one should not call that an attribute which is of the very essence of His existence—for, 'if He were to cease to *love*, He would cease to be.' The two sublimest affirmations concerning the Deity in the inspired Word are these—'God is Light,' 'God is Love.' It is the latter of these two which, apparently, had so taken hold of the mind and the heart of the poet that he never wearies of reiterating the statement of the fact in numerous connexions and in various forms. In 'Paracelsus' he declares unhesitatingly:

> God! Thou art Love! I build my faith on that.

And presently, praying for one who has erred, and for himself, he says:

> Save him, dear God; it will be like Thee: bathe him
> In light and life! Thou art not made like us;
> We should be wroth in such a case; but Thou
> Forgivest—so, forgive these passionate thoughts

Which come unsought and will not pass away!
I know Thee, who hast kept my path, and made
Light for me in the darkness, tempering sorrow
So that it reached me like a solemn joy;
It were too strange that I should doubt Thy love.[1]

How natural, again, is the comparison, which almost suggests a contrast, between the purest types of earthly love and His!

If I only knew
What was my mother's face—my father, too!
Nay, if you come to that, best love of all
Is God's; then why not have God's love befall
Myself as, in the palace by the Dome,
Monsignor?[2]

It is, indeed, a favourite method of Browning's to reason from the character of God's noblest creature up to the character of the Creator. He will not believe that there is in man that sublime spirit of unselfishness unless it be also in Him from whom it first came.

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it? Here, the parts shift?

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[1] Vol. i. 61.

[2] 'Pippa Passes,' vol. i. 198.

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what
Began?
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for
this man,
And dare doubt He alone shall not help him, who
yet alone can?[1]

So profoundly convinced is the poet of the fact that God's nature must be Love, that he does not hesitate to use such bold words as these:

In youth I looked to these very skies,
And, probing their immensities,
I found God there, His visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the power, an equal evidence
That His love, there too, was the nobler dower.
For the loving worm within its clod,
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.[2]

But it is not merely as a principle in the Divine Being that Browning conceives of Love, but as a principle in action in relation to man—not the ideal man only, not the noblest type of man, but also man at his worst! What infinite suggestive-

[1] 'Saul,' vol. i. 279. [2] 'Christmas Eve,' vol. i. 483.

ness there is in the descriptive phrase, 'He who is Pity,' and especially when it is taken in conjunction with the reference to temptation which immediately follows it!—

> Was the trial sore?
> Temptation sharp? Thank God a second time!
> Why comes temptation but for man to meet
> And master and make crouch beneath his foot,
> And so be pedestalled in triumph?[1]

Yes! even in the sorest straits in which a frail man may find himself, though he may have to fight hard for the mastery over his enemy, and—may we not say?—even if he be sometimes defeated by that enemy, God is still 'Pity'—then, indeed, more than at any time else.

In harmony with this, there are two fragments in 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,' full of the deepest insight into God's attitude towards man defiled by sin. One runs thus:

> For God
> We're good enough, though the world casts us out.

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Pope'), vol. ii. 232.

The other, in the turn of its thought, reminds us of Shakespeare at his best, in his most religious mood:

> I dare approach that Heaven
> Which has not bade a living thing despair,
> Which needs no code to keep its grace from stain,
> But bids the vilest worm that turns on it
> Desist and be forgiven.[1]

I will quote but one other passage to illustrate this particular point—and here is indicated how God's estimate of us differs from that of men; how He sees, not what we are merely, but what we may become, the possibilities of our lives, the unrealized ideals, and waits not till we have become our best before lavishing His love upon us, but gives us credit for what we would be, and values us accordingly:

> All instincts immature,
> All purposes unsure,
> . .
> All I could never be,
> All, men ignored in me,
> This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.[2]

[1] Vol. i. 348, 351. [2] 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' vol. i. 582.

Then, following naturally from this, we have the conception of God seeking the fulfilment of His purpose in man. His love is in no sense passive, it means essentially working, striving, sacrificing to realize His own ideal in the object that calls it forth. That is to say, God the Worker is the necessary complement of God the Lover. Power is joined with Pity, and that Power actually in exercise too. Compassion, sympathy, tender regard—these are incomplete in Him without the putting forth of His hand to bless and save, for He

> comes
> Before and after, with a work to do
> Which no man helps nor hinders.[1]

What I mean is suggested in bold metaphorical language in 'Balaustion's Adventure,' where the poet says:

> I think this is the authentic sign and seal
> Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,
> And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts

[1] 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,' vol. ii. 311.

Into a rage to suffer for mankind,
And recommence at sorrow: drops like seed
After the blossom, ultimate of all.
Say, does the seed scorn earth and seek the sun?
Surely it has no other end and aim
Than to drop, once more die into the ground,
Taste cold and darkness and oblivion there:
And thence rise, tree-like grow through pain to joy,
More joy and most joy,—do man good again.[1]

It is true that we cannot always discern God's working—true that He seems sometimes to leave us in our distress, as if He were not Love, as if He *were not* at all; but, though He come not to His terrified children till the 'fourth watch of the night,' He does come then, and His moment of relief and help proves itself always the most opportune possible, and we see that He is still

God the strong, God the beneficent,
God ever mindful in all strife and strait,
Who, for our own good, makes the need extreme,
Till at the last He puts forth might and saves.[2]

And, when He does at last manifest Him-

[1] Vol. i. 654.
[2] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Pompilia'), vol. ii. 166.

self, His wisdom as well as His might is vindicated, and He 'perfects that which concerneth His servants.'

But, in the accomplishment of this great purpose in man, there will necessarily be much opposition, and Browning recognizes this in all its dread reality and in all its tremendous might! He is an optimist, but he is not one who closes his eyes to pain and death and sin. He discerns all the ills of life, and yet he faces them unflinchingly, because 'the soul and God stand sure.' In one of his very early poems he gives us the keynote of that wonderful optimism of his:

> Why should I be sad or lorn of hope?
> Why ever make man's good distinct from God's,
> Or, finding they are one, why dare mistrust?[1]

Professor Henry Jones, in his book from which I have previously quoted, points out how, in the feature to which I am now referring, Browning differs

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 27.

from two others of his great contemporaries—Emerson and Carlyle. Speaking of Emerson's always rose-coloured view of things, he says: 'Such an optimism, such a plunge into the pure blue and away from facts, was Emerson's. Caroline Fox tells a story of him and Carlyle which reveals this very pointedly. It seems that Carlyle once led the serene philosopher through the abominations of the streets of London at midnight, asking him with grim humour, at every few steps, "Do you believe in the devil *now*?" Emerson replied that the more he saw of the English people the greater and better he thought them. This little incident lays bare the limits of both these great men. Where the one saw, the other was blind. To the one there was the misery and the universal murk; to the other the pure white beam was scarcely broken. Carlyle believed in the good, beyond all doubt: he fought his great

battle in its strength, and won; but "he was sorely wounded." Emerson was Sir Galahad, blind to all but the Holy Grail; his armour spotless-white, his virtue cloistered and unbreathed, his race won without the dust and heat. But his optimism was too easy to be satisfactory.'

Now, in opposition to the pessimism of Carlyle on the one hand, and the 'too easy' optimism of Emerson on the other, Browning—seeing the worst, as Carlyle saw it, and seeing also the best beyond, as Emerson saw it—reveals a true, unfailing, and glorious optimism, which grounds itself upon the only sure, immovable basis—a conviction resulting from the vision of the loving, powerful, regnant God! Evil may exist, does exist—paint it, if you will, in its blackest colours; but good exists too, and good will triumph at last, because God and good are one. And so our poet declares:

Oh, thought's absurd!—as with some monstrous fact
Which, when ill thoughts beset us, seems to give
Merciful God that made the sun and stars,
The waters and the green delights of earth,
The lie! I apprehend the monstrous fact—
Yet know the maker of all worlds is good,
And yield my reason up, inadequate
To reconcile what yet I do behold—
Blasting my sense! There's cheerful day outside.[1]

It is not necessary that we stay to inquire whether Browning believed in the personality of the devil, or, what precisely was in his mind when he referred to this evil power by name. Whatever it was, in his view it was a power destined to be vanquished:

I felt quite sure that God had set
Himself to Satan; who would spend
A minute's mistrust on the end?[2]

Delayed victory does not mean defeat. Evil, seemingly triumphant, may flaunt itself, and its devotees may imagine that this is its destiny, but

[1] 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,' vol. i. 340.
[2] 'Count Gismond,' vol. i. 386.

God, who seems acquiescent in the main
With those who add 'So will He ever sleep'—
Flutters their foolishness from time to time,
Puts forth His right hand recognizably;
Even as, to fools who deem He needs must right
Wrong on the instant, as if earth were heaven,
He wakes remonstrance — 'Passive, Lord, how long?'[1]

Suddenly, without warning, mysteriously, He interposes, and His work is revealed:

When ye find . . .
One wave of the hand of God amid the worlds
Bid vapour vanish, darkness flee away,
And let the vexed star culminate in peace
Approachable no more by earthly mist.[2]

It is the conviction which the poet cherishes, that this is the issue of all the struggle and tumult and anguish occasioned by the conflict of right and wrong, light and darkness, which accounts for the oft-quoted lines of the song in 'Pippa Passes,' as the expression of his noble faith and hope and prophetic vision:

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Book and the Ring'), vol. ii. 286.
[2] Ibid., vol. ii. 287.

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world.[1]

Such, then, are some of the thoughts of God which are to be discovered in the works of this great poet. Like all reverent thinkers, he recognizes his own limitations, and the possibility of errors, especially in his conception of the supernatural. Hence the scathing satire of Paracelsus in his reply to the flippant speech of Festus, concerning the will of God:

Now, 'tis this I most admire—
The constant talk men of your stamp keep up
Of God's will, as they style it; one would swear
Man had but merely to uplift his eye,
And see the will in question charactered
On the heaven's vault.[2]

And hence, too, the suggestive lines in 'The Ring and the Book':

[1] Vol. i. 202. [2] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 43.

Correct the portrait by the living face,
Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man.[1]

But, whatever the mistakes made in portrayal, whatever the imperfect views acquired of Him, God, i.e. 'God's God,' is always not simply an article in the poet's creed, but (as we intimated above) an Element to be reckoned with in his philosophy, and the greatest, the most potent Force in his life. Is it, then, a vain wish, is it not rather a natural, universal longing that is expressed in connexion with the story of René Gentilhomme, one of 'The Two Poets of Croisic'?—

I care—intimately care to have
Experience how a human creature felt
In after-life, who bore the burden grave
Of certainly believing God had dealt
For once directly with him: did not rave
—A maniac, did not find his reason melt
—An idiot, but went on, in peace or strife,
The world's way, lived an ordinary life.[2]

And though that longing may not be

[1] 'The Pope,' vol. ii. 242.
[2] 'The Two Poets of Croisic,' vol. ii. 563.

fulfilled in the way desired, though a direct revelation, such as is sometimes sought, may be 'forbidden by the laws of life,' yet that life is full of indirect messages from the unseen world; all our 'simulated thunder-claps,' all our 'counterfeited truths,' all those glimpses of beauty which startle while they elude the soul, are messages of this kind—darts shot from the spirit world, which rebound as they touch, yet sting us to the consciousness of its existence.[1]

This, Browning clearly perceived. He, a man of affairs, finding pleasure in the society of other human beings, a man to whom this world and all its concerns were intensely real, nevertheless understood the meaning, as perhaps few have done, of the words of the seer of long ago, 'The tabernacle of God is with men'—that tabernacle concealing, even while it proclaims, His sacred presence; and so to

[1] *Vide* Mrs. Sutherland Orr's *Handbook*, p. 268.

himself might his own confident saying concerning another be most aptly applied:

He at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.[1]

[1] 'La Saisiaz,' vol. ii. 555.

II

CONCERNING JESUS CHRIST

II

CONCERNING JESUS CHRIST

'These general truths [as to the Person of Christ] were anciently summed up as follows: Christ is truly God, perfectly Man, unconfusedly in two Natures, indivisibly in one Person. Later developments of dogma pursue the subject into a multitude of subtleties which have made no real advancement towards the solution of what remains THE MYSTERY OF GOD, EVEN CHRIST.'

DR. W. B. POPE.

AT first sight it may seem wholly inappropriate to place such words as these at the head of this chapter, especially when it is remembered that they are the words of a professor of theology,

from whom one would naturally expect the greatest possible precision of speech in relation to any branch of the science which it was his business to teach. Surely there can be nothing in the poet to correspond with this!

And yet I will dare to say that no unbiassed reader of Browning can peruse his poems, in quest of his teaching concerning the Founder of the Christian religion, without discovering that the poet has said, in his own way, exactly what the theological professor has said in his.

I do not propose to analyse the definition or description given above, to divide its phrases one from another, and then to show how there is that in the poet's productions which harmonizes with every separate phrase. My object is rather to set forth in outline what the poet evidently believed in regard to this 'mystery,' and then to allow his faith as a whole to make its own impression. Of the

nature of that impression I have no doubt at all.

It is noteworthy that Browning does not ask for the acceptance of the Bible doctrine of the Incarnate God, on the ground of authority only. He saw that that doctrine is not antagonistic to, or inharmonious with, any faculty of man's mind. In the recent past, numerous attempts have been made to prove that the Incarnation is in accord with the most up-to-date teachings of science; and so, advanced theologians tell us of 'two views held as regards the divine motive behind the Incarnation, which may be briefly termed (1) the Evolutionary, and (2) the Redemptive or Soteriological.' These are not, of course, mutually exclusive, though the school of thought to which a man belongs will determine on which of the two he will place the greater emphasis. Shall we be wrong if we say that Browning emphasized both equally? He could

write, on the one hand, such familiar lines as these:

> I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ
> *Accepted by thy reason,*[1] solves for thee
> All questions in the earth and out of it,
> And has so far advanced thee to be wise.[2]

And, on the other hand, as Dr. Berdoe rightly says: 'The poems "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day" are meaningless if they do not express their author's belief in the divinity of our Lord *and His atoning sacrifice.*[1] Christ is no fable or myth to Browning: for the Göttingen professor who taught that doctrine he prays;

> May Christ do for him what no mere man shall,
> And stand confessed as the God of Salvation.[3]

But, to be a little more explicit, there are several points involved in what we have already said, which may be roughly classified under the following headings:—

1. First, the absolute deity of Christ—

[1] *The italics are mine.*
[2] 'A Death in the Desert,' vol. i. 590.
[3] 'Christmas Eve,' vol. i. 495.

'the illimitable God.' So the postscript to 'A Death in the Desert' describes Him; and in this poem, perhaps more clearly than in any other, the poet's faith in this distinctive doctrine of Christianity is revealed. Of course it may be true, as Mr. Nettleship has said, 'that "A Death in the Desert" goes no single step in the direction of proving Christ's divinity as a dogma'; but the poem itself is void of all meaning, unless, in spite of its dramatic form, it can be regarded as setting forth the deepest conviction of the poet's own soul. Hence the verdict of the man who adds the final note is this:

> If Christ, as thou affirmest, be of men
> Mere man, the first and best but nothing more,—
> Account Him, for reward of what He was,
> Now and for ever, wretchedest of all.[1]

And when he puts the inevitable alternative,

> Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
> Or lost!

[1] 'A Death in the Desert,' vol. i. 593.

he significantly adds concerning the opponent of the loftier faith:

> But 'twas Cerinthus that is lost.[1]

In the body of the poem, too, there is one striking scene, the suggestiveness of which cannot be overlooked or mistaken. St. John is dying in the desert. He has lapsed into unconsciousness. Four grown disciples and a boy are with him. They use restoratives, they chafe his hands, one of them prays—all with the view of bringing him back again to conscious life, but all in vain.

> Then the Boy sprang up from his knees, and ran,
> Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,
> And fetched the seventh plate of graven lead
> Out of the secret chamber, found a place,
> Pressing with finger on the deeper dints,
> And spoke, as 'twere his mouth proclaiming first,
> 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'
> Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
> And sat up of himself, and looked at us.[2]

That word of the Master had done for

[1] 'A Death in the Desert,' vol. i. 593.
[2] Ibid., vol. i. 584.

him what nothing else could, and disclosed the power that dwelt in Him alone.

In view of this scene, it is not surprising to read of Browning, in Mrs. Sutherland Orr's *Life*,[1] such words as these: 'He has repeatedly written or declared, in the words of Charles Lamb, "If Christ entered the room, I should fall on my knees"; and again, in those of Napoleon, "I am an understander of men, and *He* was no man."' Referring to the former saying, Mrs. Orr adds, in a footnote, 'These words have more significance when taken with their context: "If Shakespeare was to come into the room, we should all rise up to meet him; but if that Person [meaning Christ] was to come into the room, we should all fall down to try to kiss the hem of His garment!"'

With so lofty a conception of Christ's supremacy, it follows that men must

[1] P. 318.

recognize it, or else neglect to do so at their own terrible cost. And this is intimated twice over in almost identical language, in 'The Ring and the Book':

> Our Lord Himself . . .
> Sealing the sum of sufferance up, received
> Opprobrium, contumely and buffeting
> Without complaint: but when He found Himself
> Touched in His honour never so little for once,
> Then outbroke indignation pent before—
> '*Honorem meum nemini dabo!*' 'No,
> My honour I to nobody will give!'[1]

2. But the complementary truth to that we have just been considering is found also in Browning's poems, namely, Christ's real manhood, or, as it has been called, in what seems to me a better phrase, because more adequately expressing the actual fact—the human life of God.

It would be altogether beside our purpose in this volume to enter upon any discussion as to the nature and properties of the humanity of Jesus Christ. Suffice

[1] 'Dominus Hyacinthus,' vol. ii. 181; *vide* also vol. ii. 243.

it to say, that on no other hypothesis can you satisfactorily explain His life and its results than on this—that He was as truly man as we ourselves are men:

> who trod . . .
> This earth in weakness, shame and pain,
> Dying the death whose signs remain
> Up yonder on the accursèd tree.[1]

That is evidently implied in the very form of speech which the poet puts into the mouth of 'The Critic,' who has done his best to pulverize faith in the historical Christ. When those who had come under his influence looked for the monition that their 'faith, reduced to such condition, be swept forthwith to its natural dust-hole,' said he:

> Go home and venerate *the myth*
> I thus have experimented with—
> *This man*, continue to adore Him
> Rather than all who went before Him,
> And all who ever followed after![2]

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[1] 'Christmas Eve,' vol. i. 487.
[2] Ibid., vol. i. 493.

The italics are mine, and the point I would have us observe is this, that the *myth* is a *man*! The sceptical professor can make him nothing else. In spite of himself, he recognizes the reality of His manhood, and places Him at the head of His race.

But in no place do I find a truer, more faithful, embodiment of the Scripture teaching concerning this than in the magnificent poem 'Saul.' 'It begins with the expression of an exalted human tenderness, and ends in a prophetic vision of divine love as manifested in Christ.' David is the speaker. He has come into Saul's presence to call him forth from the depression and agony into which he has fallen. He sings and plays to him —but all to no purpose. His musical skill avails not to achieve its object. Then music and harp are laid aside. He speaks, he prays, and this is what he says:

Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou—
so wilt thou!
So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost
crown—
And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor
down
One spot for the creature to stand in!

. . . . . .

'Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh,
that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it
shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to
me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand
like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See
the Christ stand![1]

3. Following from this, something must be said as to the actual or possible relationship sustained by the divine-human Christ to man.

That there is an essential relationship of one sort or other cannot for a moment be doubted. Explain it as we may, no one, having once heard of Jesus, can ever be independent of Him, can ever

[1] 'Saul,' vol. i. 280.

be the same after as he was before. Is not that truth embodied, in part at least, in the speech of Caponsacchi, the priest who assisted Pompilia in her flight to Rome, when he says?—

> You are Christians; somehow, no one ever plucked
> A rag, even, from the body of the Lord,
> To wear and mock with, but, despite himself,
> He looked the greater and was the better.[1]

Similarly, the influence of the Incarnate Son of God is implicitly suggested in another part of this great poem ('The Ring and the Book') in a single line that fell from the lips of one of the lawyers, Arcangeli, 'the jolly learned man of middle age.' Preoccupied as he is for the most part with his Latin phrases, he yet now and again breaks away from them, and then his speech becomes terse and forceful and direct. What could be finer than this question of his? How one may see in it

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 119.

meanings far beyond the original intention:

> Doubt ye the force of Christmas on the soul?[1]

'The force of Christmas.' Surely here is a text for a sermon, which might contain divisions and subdivisions almost innumerable.

The designed effect of the Incarnation of Christ and all that that involves is indicated to us in 'words that burn' at the close of the 'Epistle of Karshish.' This epistle is avowedly written from Bethany by an Arab physician to a certain Abib, the writer's master in the science of medicine, and in it he tells, with utmost caution, from a medical point of view, the story of Lazarus after his alleged resurrection. As he—the physician—relates it, Lazarus 'has been the subject of a prolonged epileptic trance, and his reason has been impaired by a too sudden awakening

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 178.

from it.' But the 'madman' himself labours under the fixed idea that he was raised from the dead, and there is something in him and in his recital of events which haunts and fascinates the doctor, and from which he finds it impossible to break away, until at last his pent-up feeling finds vent for itself in this agitated appeal:

> The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
> So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
> So, through the thunder comes a human voice
> Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!
> Face, My hands fashioned, see it in Myself!
> Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of Mine,
> But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,
> And thou must love Me who have died for thee!'
> The madman saith He said so: it is strange.[1]

That should be 'the force of Christmas' —and all that follows what Christmas represents—'on the soul.' The God-man humbling Himself and becoming 'obedient unto death' *ought* to enkindle in the soul a passionate, responsive love to Him and

[1] 'An Epistle,' vol. i. 515.

to all men. And yet, in its place, too frequently, there is callous indifference towards Him, and bickering and strife in relation to others; and His

> Sad face on the cross sees only this
> After the passion of a thousand years.[1]

Over against that, however, one is glad to put an experience, realized in unnumbered instances, and portrayed for us in simple but exquisitely beautiful lines in 'Pauline':

> O Thou pale form . . .
> . . . oft have I stood by Thee—
> Have I been keeping lonely watch with Thee
> In the damp night by weeping Olivet,
> Or leaning on Thy bosom, proudly less,
> Or dying with Thee on the lonely cross,
> Or witnessing Thine outburst from the tomb.[2]

'The words of genius,' George Eliot has said, 'bear a wider meaning than the thought that prompted them.' Might not that saying be rightly applied to the words

[1] 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' vol. i. 520.
[2] Vol. i. 13.

just quoted? May not such words be taken as referring not only to the intense interest and devoted love awakened in the soul by the contemplation of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, but also as expressing that union with Him in all His experiences, into which the truly devout soul inevitably enters? This is the consummation of Christian experience in this world—to be 'joined unto the Lord,' and to become 'one spirit' with Him.

We cannot more appropriately close this chapter than by a brief reference to the teaching of the Epilogue to 'Dramatis Personae'—'a comprehensive and suggestive vision of the religious life of humanity.' There are three speakers here. The first is David, representing 'the Old Testament theism, with its solemn celebrations, its pompous worship, and the strong material faith which bowed down the thousands as one man, before the visible glory of the Lord.' The second speaker is Renan,

who represents nineteenth-century scepticism, and the longing of the heart for the old belief which scientific reason has dispelled. This belief is symbolized by a 'Face' which once looked down from heights of glory upon men, 'by a star which shone down upon them in responsive light and love. The face has vanished into darkness. The star, gradually receding, has lost itself in the multitude of the lesser lights of heaven.' The third speaker is Browning himself, and he 'corrects both the material faith of the Old Testament, and the scientific doubt of the nineteenth century, by the idea of a more mystical and individual intercourse between God and man.'[1] For him — the poet — the divine glory has not been lost. It has been revealed more clearly than in Old Testament times, in 'the FACE of Jesus Christ,' and no form of scepticism has been able to blot it out or to obscure it from

[1] *Vide* Mrs. Orr's *Handbook*, pp. 240–1.

his vision. To him Jesus is the everlasting Christ—'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.'

> That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
> Or decomposes but to recompose,
> Become my universe that feels and knows.[1]

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[1] 'Dramatis Personae' ('Epilogue'), vol. i. 626.

III

CONCERNING MAN

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CONCERNING MAN

'The proper study of mankind is man.'

POPE.

AS has been noticed by all Browning students, and as we shall have occasion to observe further in a subsequent chapter, our poet is linked essentially, not with the quiet life of the country, but with the restless activity of the town. 'Born a Londoner, and proud to own himself a citizen of the greatest city upon earth, it is with London, Florence, and Venice that his name is imperishably interwoven: not the Lake district of Wordsworth, nor the Geneva of Byron, nor the Spezzia of

Shelley.' And this being so, it is not surprising that he should write of 'men and women,' dissecting human character, analysing human motives and aims, as no other poet—except the great Bard of Avon—has ever done.

For though one may depict man as he is, with some degree of truthfulness and propriety, by simply following the advice contained in Sidney's maxim, 'Look in thy heart and write,' yet the delineation which results from introspection alone cannot be so accurate, so comprehensive, or so convincing as that which is the outcome of constant association with, and close observation of, other human beings. Because Browning knew *men*, he could depict *man*—at his best, and at his worst too.

His conception of the inherent dignity of man is magnificent. He sees him as he came forth from the hand of his Creator, and as bearing still the marks of his origin, and therefore of his ultimate des-

tiny also. There is nothing in his philosophy which tends to demean, or in any way to belittle, any of his kind. For every man *as a man* he has a genuine respect.

In this he certainly gives us a far worthier and nobler lead than Carlyle. Every one knows how the Sage of Chelsea felt towards ordinary average human beings, the manner in which he characterized the undistinguished millions of the English people, and how he spoke of the Americans also as so many millions of the greatest *bores* ever seen in this world. Carlyle believed in great men, in heroes and hero-worship, and in that sense it may be said, of course, that even he reverenced humanity ; but side by side with that there was in him a 'disdainful indifference' to all who in his view did not answer to that description. Browning, on the contrary, believed in man as such, saw in him the lineaments of the divine character, and

exulted in his own kinship with a race of such descent:

> I'll tell you: all the more I know mankind,
> The more I thank God, like my grandmother,
> For making me a little lower than
> The angels, honour-clothed and glory-crowned:
> This is the honour,—that no thing I know,
> Feel, or conceive, but I can make my own
> Somehow, by use of hand or head or heart:
> This is the glory,—that in all conceived,
> Or felt, or known, I recognize a mind
> Not mine but like mine,—for the double joy,—
> Making all things for me and me for Him.[1]

It is possible, I suppose, to maintain that, in some respects, Browning 'held a view of descent and development not very different from Darwin's.' Certainly he was not unaffected by the trend of the scientific thinking of his time in regard to evolution. It reveals itself again and again. But it is not man's relation to the brute creation that impresses him most, it is rather this—that he is

> for aye removed
> From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.[2]

[1] 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society,' vol. ii. 299.

[2] 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' vol. i. 581.

Concerning Man

Luthardt very finely says: 'The earthly creation is man analysed, and man is creation synthetised. Such is the view of Scripture, as laid down in those words which precede the creation of man and succeed that of all the other creatures, "Let us make man." But the word of God continues, "In our image." God designs to be imaged in man. The whole world is a mirror of God, of His power and wisdom; but His most special nature will give itself a creature image in man.'[1] God sustains to him a relationship which he bears to no other, and therefore what higher ambition could one cherish than to fulfil His purpose in this relationship? Is there not that which appeals to the heart of every true man in these noble lines from 'Paracelsus'?

But if delusions trouble me, and Thou,
Not seldom felt with rapture in Thy help
Throughout my toils and wanderings, dost intend
To work man's welfare through my weak endeavour,

[1] *Moral Truths of Christianity*, p. 29.

To crown my mortal forehead with a beam
From Thine own blinding crown, to smile, and guide
This puny hand and let the work so wrought
Be styled my work,—hear me! I covet not
An influx of new power, an angel's soul:
It were no marvel then—but I have reached
Thus far, a man; let me conclude, a man![1]

But the dignity of man is implied not only in his origin and in his allotted tasks, but also *in his capacity to apprehend and commune with the Infinite*, and in his efforts to realize this ideal. Man's personality, be it observed, is entirely distinct from that of the Divine Being:

I know that He is there as I am here
. . . I,—not He,—
Live, think, do human work here—no machine,
His will moves, but a being by-myself,
His, and not He who made me for a work,
Watches my working, judges its effect,
But does not interpose.

This is illustrated by the supposed relationship of a courier to one who commands him. He takes a long journey, fulfilling the behests of his lord and master:

[1] Vol. i. 31.

I bid him, since I have the right to bid,
And, my part done so far, his part begins.
. . . . . .
. . . Exactly thus men stand to God:
I with my courier, God with me. Just so
I have His bidding to perform; but mind
And body, all of me, though made and meant
For that sole service, must consult, concert
With my own self and nobody beside,
How to effect the same: God helps not else.[1]

But though the two—God and man—are quite distinct one from another, it can never be said that the one is independent of the other in any sense at all. And *that* is, to man, no humiliation, but a sign and evidence of highest glory. 'God and man,' the theologian tells us, 'cannot remain apart from each other, cannot maintain indifference towards each other: they struggle towards each other from an intrinsic necessity, they exist for each other; for God will be the God of man, and man is to be a man of God. There is in God an inward tendency towards

[1] 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society, vol. ii. 294.

man; for He willed that man should exist: man is the first and last thought of God, the resolution of His will, the beloved of His heart. There is in man an inward tendency towards God; for he proceeded from the will of God, he was made by and for God. The will of God, as it is the reason of his existence, is also the law of his life and the aim of his efforts. God is the deepest need of man, his highest aim, and that for which he is incessantly striving.'[1]

Is not that what Browning is saying to us over and over again? I quote one passage only, typical of many:

> You own your instincts? why, what else do I,
> Who want, am made for, and must have a God
> Ere I can be aught, do aught?—no mere name
> Want, but the true thing with what proves its truth,
> To wit, a relation from that thing to me,
> Touching from head to foot—which touch I feel,
> And with it take the rest, this life of ours![2]

No wonder that, with such a view of

[1] Luthardt, *Fundamental Truths*, p. 149.
[2] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 539.

man's nature, the contrast between him and all beneath him, over which he should have dominion, is asserted in the most emphatic terms! No wonder that the thought of his dignity never leaves him, and saves him from a descent to which too often he is tempted!—

> A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.[1]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I am
> A man yet: I need never humble me.
> I would have been—something, I know not what;
> But though I cannot soar, I do not crawl.[2]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Meditate on a man's immense mistake
> Who, fashioned to use feet and walk, deigns crawl—
> Takes the unmanly means.[3]

Even the wretched Guido, after the commission and detection of his horrible crime, feigns and simulates a spirit, which, alas! he had lost, as he says:

> I lived and died a man, and take man's chance,
> Honest and bold: right will be done to such.[4]

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[1] 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' vol. i. 581. [2] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 47.
[3] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Pope'), vol. ii. 226.
[4] Ibid. ('Guido'), vol. ii. 279.

The possible counterpart of all this, Browning does not hide from us. The being who is of such noble descent, so richly endowed, of such unmeasured capabilities for that which is purest, highest, best, may so mar his nature and so thwart the purposes of his Maker, that the resemblance between what he might have been and what he has become shall hardly be discerned. He who was made 'a little lower than God' may become a devil; he who should be 'crowned with glory and honour' may be overwhelmed, through his own folly and sin, with shame and contempt.

So Paracelsus speaks of one whom he 'helped to die' thus:

> No mean trick
> He left untried, and truly wellnigh wormed
> All traces of God's finger out of him:
> Then died, grown old.[1]

And the Pope, in 'The Ring and the

[1] Vol. i. 38.

Book,' gives a picture of Guido as he really was, in which he spares him not for an instant, laying bare the unutterable baseness of his nature, in terms about which there can be no mistake:

> The best, he knew and feigned, the worst he took.
> Not one permissible impulse moves the man,
> From the mere liking of the eye and ear,
> To the true longing of the heart that loves,
> No trace of these: but all to instigate,
> Is what sinks man past level of the brute
> Whose appetite if brutish is a truth.
> All is the lust for money: to get gold,—
> Why, lie, rob, if it must be, murder! Make
> Body and soul wring gold out, lured within
> The clutch of hate by love, the trap's pretence!
> What good else get from bodies and from souls?
> This got, there were some life to lead thereby,
> —What, where or how, appreciate those who tell
> How the toad lives: it lives,—enough for me!
> To get this good,—with but a groan or so,
> Then, silence of the victims,—were the feat.[1]

But this—the terrible lapse into flagrant moral evil, and the degradation consequent thereupon—is not the only peril to which man, with his God-like nature, is exposed. There are other means by

[1] Vol. ii. 223-4.

which his true manhood may be lost or obscured. What a perversion of character, for example, is implied in such a couplet as this!—

> Lapo, there's one thing plain and positive;
> Man seeks his own good at the whole world's cost.[1]

Or in that terse description of 'The Medium':

> However sad the truth may seem,
> Sludge is of all-importance to himself.[2]

The perversion is most clearly seen when, side by side with *it*, you look upon that from which it has departed—the picture of one whose nobility is preserved untarnished:

> For I, a man, with men am linked
> And not a brute with brutes; no gain
> That I experience, must remain
> Unshared.[3]

There is another phase of the same danger—the descent of man to something

[1] 'Luria,' vol. i. 441. [2] Vol. i. 616.
[3] 'Christmas Eve, &c.,' vol. i. 494.

inferior to himself—which was not unrecognized by Browning, namely, that of losing his manhood in his trade or profession, that indicated in the familiar, almost proverbial, description of a *lapsus* —'He was a man, he died a grocer.' And in these days of intense and acute commercialism the danger is certainly an imminent one. Hence the pathetic appropriateness of the closing lines of the poem entitled 'Shop,' which poem, strangely enough, is followed by 'Pisgah-Sights':

> Shop each day and all day long!
> Friend, your good angel slept, your star
> Suffered eclipse, fate did you wrong!
> From where these sorts of treasures are,
> There should our hearts be—Christ, how far![1]

Somewhat similar to this in character are the words which depict Sordello:

> And lo, Sordello vanished utterly,
> Sundered in twain; each spectral part at strife
> With each; one jarred against another life;
> The Poet thwarting hopelessly the Man.[2]

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[1] Vol. ii. 481. [2] Vol. i. 136.

Who does not know from his own experience how easily one may be victimized thus—thwarted, vanquished, enslaved by his surroundings, his daily calling, his worse self? or, how one has continually to struggle to prevent this most terrible calamity from falling upon him?

And here, again, Browning comes to our help with this inspiring thought:

> 'Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man Would do![1]

By which I understand him to mean that a man must be judged as to his manhood, not alone by his achievements but by his cherished ideals, for the realization of which he unceasingly, though sometimes unsuccessfully, strives. It is the poet's own setting of the truth (expressed elsewhere in his poems, notably in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra') indicated in the words of Holy Scripture, and spoken to one whose great ideal remained unrealized by him

[1] 'Saul,' vol. i. 279.

—'Thou didst well that it was *in thine heart*.'

There is one fact clearly brought out by Browning—additional to those which have already been noticed—which shows unmistakably the worth of man, of the individual man, and that is, his possible relationship to the great mass of mankind. Of the solidarity of the human race there can be no question at all, and thus:

> Each of the Many helps to recruit
> The life of the race by a general plan;
> Each living his own, to boot.[1]

And:

> The sense within me that I owe a debt
> Assures me—somewhere must be somebody
> Ready to take his due.[2]

But it is not this general relationship of each to all others to which I specially call attention, but rather the fact, emphasized by the poet—that, in such mutual relationships, power and privilege frequently fall

[1] 'By the Fire-side,' vol. i. 284.
[2] 'A Bean-Stripe, &c.,' vol. ii. 682.

to the lot of *some*, who therefore, of necessity, lead, and influence, and advance the interests of their fellows. Grades of ability we are bound to recognize :

> The office of ourselves,—nor blind nor dumb,
> And seeing somewhat of man's state,—has been,
> For the worst of us, to say they so have seen ;
> For the better, what it was they saw ; the best
> Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.[1]

Who shall say who those are that 'impart the gift of seeing to the rest'? Sometimes the most unlikely find themselves, through their fidelity to truth and duty and conviction, in the van of the progressive march of their kind. But, however that may be, there is the fact that

> 'Tis in the advance of individual minds
> That the slow crowd should ground their expectation
> Eventually to follow ; as the sea
> Waits ages in its bed till some one wave
> Out of the multitudinous mass, extends
> The empire of the whole, some feet perhaps,
> Over the strip of sand which could confine
> Its fellows so long time : thenceforth the rest,

[1] 'Sordello,' vol. i. 153.

Even to the meanest, hurry in at once,
And so much is clear gained.[1]

And so to Luria, Tiburzio speaks in the same strain:

A people is but the attempt of many
To rise to the completer life of one;
And those who live as models for the mass
Are singly of more value than they all.
Such man are you, and such a time is this,
That your sole fate concerns a nation more
Than much apparent welfare: that to prove
Your rectitude, and duly crown the same,
Imports us far beyond to-day's event,
A battle's loss or gain: man's mass remains,—
Keep but God's model safe, new men will rise
To take its mould, and other days to prove
How great a good was Luria's glory.[2]

None of us knows at the outset his own destiny, the limitless possibilities of his own life. We may be called to lead, or it may be left us simply to follow a stronger and braver than we. But, be that as it may, there is one ideal for us all which we must ever seek to realize—the Best; and it must be ours to scorn anything less

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 48. [2] 'Luria,' vol. i. 464.

worthy, anything that detracts from the achievement of our truest manhood.

> What had I on earth to do
> With the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?
> Like the aimless, helpless, hopeless, did I drivel—
> Being—who?
> One who never turned his back but marched breast-forward,
> Never doubted clouds would break,
> Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
> Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
> Sleep to wake.[1]

And, even when we have reached that stage of perfection, it must be ours still to say, 'Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on.' For certainly in this life man never comes to himself. There are always other possibilities beyond him. And, in harmony with this, our poet declares, striking still that same note of the essential dignity of human nature with which in this chapter we set out:

> A man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Or what's a heaven for?[2]

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[1] 'Asolando' ('Epilogue'), vol. ii. 773.
[2] 'Andrea Del Sarto,' vol. i. 524.

IV

CONCERNING THE SOUL

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CONCERNING THE SOUL

'The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so.'

'Preface to Sordello.'

THESE words, if there were no others like them in his poems, would make it perfectly clear that Browning was not in any sense a materialist. Indeed, his whole work, rightly viewed, was an emphatic protest against materialism, whether it be of the most vulgar or of the most refined type. Not without reason has he been

called the 'subtlest assertor of the soul in song.'

But his teaching, though subtle, is unmistakable in its significance. He 'believed in Soul—in his own soul—as he was very sure of God.'[1] As Joubert said of the Divine Being: 'It is not difficult to believe in God, if one does not worry oneself to define Him'—so Browning felt of that 'Spark within us of the Immortal Fire.' Hence he does not seek to define the soul, does not even endeavour to prove its existence. That existence he takes for granted:

> God . . . Soul . . . the only facts for me.
> Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such:
> Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much.'[2]

Very scathingly does he deal with those who profess to know all things about that which is so largely hidden:

[1] 'La Saisiaz,' vol. ii. 555. [2] Ibid., 547.

Concerning the Soul

'You are sick, that's sure'—they say:
'Sick of what?'—they disagree.
''Tis the brain'—thinks Doctor A;
''Tis the heart'—holds Doctor B;
'The liver—my life I'd lay!'
'The lungs!' 'The lights!'
Ah me!
So ignorant of man's whole
Of bodily organs plain to see—
So sage and certain, frank and free,
About what's under lock and key—
Man's soul![1]

He—the poet—will not lay claim to such power to analyse the immaterial part of man's being, or to diagnose any disease to which it may be subject; and yet by self-communion he has gained knowledge enough to enable him to speak with no uncertain sound concerning its possibilities of purity and bliss or of sin and woe.

I have gone inside my soul
And shut its door behind me: 'tis your torch
Makes the place dark: the darkness let alone
Grows tolerable twilight: one may grope
And get to guess at length and breadth and depth.[2]

This 'tolerable twilight' revealed to

[1] 'Dramatic Idylls,' 2nd series, vol. ii. 604.
[2] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Guido'), vol. ii. 277.

him, among other things, the unutterable worth, the grandeur, the glory of the soul. It showed him, for example, its superiority to the body, which is simply 'the Machine for Acting Will'[1]—words that forcibly remind us of Shakespeare's :

Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him, HAMLET.

Not that the body is by him despised or ignored. He is far removed from that ancient school of philosophers who held that all matter is essentially evil, that the body must be placed in this category, and that it is of necessity an enemy of the soul, a hindrance to the soul's highest life.

When Archbishop Whately was dying, his chaplain read to him the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and then quoted the words from the Epistle to the Philippians (iii. 20–1): 'We look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change *our vile body*, &c.' The

[1] 'Sordello,' vol. i. 141.

dying man was pained, and asked for 'the right thing' to be read to him. The chaplain then repeated it again, with the rendering, with which we are now familiar in the Revised Version: 'Who shall fashion anew *the body of our humiliation.*' 'That is right,' said the Archbishop; 'there is nothing vile which God has made.'

Such, I think, was Robert Browning's view of the material body. Under some conditions he does not hesitate to give it precedence over the soul. Thus:

> 'Not bread alone' but bread before all else
> For these: the bodily want serve first, said I;
> If earth-space and the life-time help not here,
> Where is the good of body having been?
> But, helping body, if we somewhat baulk
> The soul of finer fare, such food's to find
> Elsewhere and afterward.'[1]

Nor does he scruple to say, in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra':

> Let us not always say
> 'Spite of this flesh to-day
> I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!

[1] 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,' vol. ii. 304.

As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry 'All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!'[1]

Still, while fairly recognizing the claims of the body—its value, its sacredness—it is the spiritual part of man on which the poet mainly fastens his gaze, as being to him incomparably the more important of the two. 'Your business,' he says to the painters in 'Fra Lippo Lippi'—

Your business is not to catch men with show,
With homage to the perishable clay,
But lift them over it, ignore it all,
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
Your business is to paint the souls of men—
. . . . . .
Give us no more of body than shows soul![2]

Some have accused Browning of teaching the dogma of the transmigration of souls, and perhaps there are a few lines scattered through his poems which would seem to countenance and support such an accusation; but the evidence for this is, in

[1] Vol. i. 581. [2] Vol. i. 520.

my judgement, so slight as not to demand our serious consideration. On the other hand, the soul's personal relationship to God, its origin in Him, its longing for communion with Him, its revelation of Him—all these are suggested to us by the poet, beyond the shadow of a doubt. Thus, for instance, how much significance there is in a single phrase in 'The Ring and the Book':

> My poor spark had for its source, the sun.[1]

Again, there could scarcely be anything finer, as indicating the poet's estimate of the immaterial in man, than this, from his very earliest poem:

> And what is that I hunger for but God?
> My God, my God, let me for once look on Thee
> As though nought else existed, we alone!
> And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark
> Expands till I can say,—Even from myself
> I need Thee and I feel Thee and I love Thee.[2]

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[1] 'The Pope,' vol. ii. 234. [2] 'Pauline,' vol. i. 12.

And yet, again, what must that be which can interpret God Himself to others?—

> Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
> God stooping shows sufficient of His light
> For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise.[1]

Victor Hugo, in his great romance,[2] says: 'The mind's eye can nowhere find anything more dazzling nor more dark than in man; it can fix itself upon nothing which is more awful, more complex, more mysterious, or more infinite. There is one spectacle grander than the sea—that is the sky; there is one spectacle grander than the sky—that is the interior of the soul.'

That is the impression which Browning gives to every thoughtful reader of his poetry, and in harmony therewith he actually says, as if he were summing up his own conceptions—not otherwise to be expressed:

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Pompilia'), vol. ii. 172.
[2] *Les Miserables*, vol. i. 80.

What a world for each
Must somehow be i' the soul.[1]

With such a view of the soul—its wondrousness, its unmeasured capabilities—it is not surprising that the poet should recognize how sometimes it chafes at its environment, feels itself hemmed in, and though it may uplift the body, being 'the only bird which sustains its cage,' yet nevertheless longs for freedom from the body, and asserts its independent existence—an existence which defies even death itself. So in 'Pauline' we hear intimations of its immortality in these suggestive lines:

I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest
In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:
It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,
Which nowise I account for nor explain,
But cannot stifle, being bound to trust
All feelings equally, to hear all sides:
How can my life indulge them? yet they live,
Referring to some state of life unknown.[2]

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[1] 'Fifine at the Fair,' vol. ii. 338. [2] Vol. i. 9.

Similarly, Paracelsus strikes the same note when he says:

> See this soul of ours!
> How it strives weakly in the child, is loosed
> In manhood, clogged by sickness, back compelled
> By age and waste, set free at last by death.[1]

And later:

> Now, do you know,
> I can reveal a secret which shall comfort
> Even you. I have no julep, as men think,
> To cheat the grave; but a far better secret.
> Know, then, you did not ill to trust your love
> To the cold earth: I have thought much of it:
> For I believe we do not wholly die.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Nay, do not laugh; there is a reason
> For what I say: I think the soul can never
> Taste death.[2]

And in what has been described as 'one of the daintiest, most musical, most witching and haunting of Mr. Browning's poems,' there is this positive assertion:

> The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.
> Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,

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[1] Vol. i. 26. [2] Vol. i. 60.

Concerning the Soul

Mathematics are your pastime ; souls shall rise in their degree ;
Butterflies may dread extinction, — you'll not die, it cannot be ![1]

'The great revelation which man now needs,' said Dr. Channing, in the first half of the last century, 'is a revelation of man to himself. The faith which is most wanted is a faith in what we and our fellow beings may become, a faith in the divine germ or principle in every soul. In regard to most of what are called the mysteries of religion we may innocently be ignorant. But the mystery within ourselves, the mystery of our spiritual, accountable, immortal nature, it behoves us to explore. Happy are they who have begun to penetrate it, and in whom it has awakened feelings of awe towards themselves, and of deep interest and honour towards their fellow creatures.'

That 'revelation' Browning saw, that 'faith' he possessed, that 'mystery' he

[1] 'A Toccata of Galuppi's,' vol. i. 267.

had very largely 'explored,' and hence his 'deep interest' in everything pertaining thereto, his anxiety that the soul should receive the right treatment, his indignation when it was treated wrongly.

> 'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls,
> And matter enough to save one's own.[1]

It was bad enough to feed the spiritual nature with inferior, unworthy food—'stifling soul in mediocrities.' It was worse—far, far worse—to have its whiteness stained by wrongdoing, and its peace destroyed by the pangs consequent thereon. What a picture is that of

> A soul made weak by its pathetic want
> Of just the first apprenticeship to sin
> Which thenceforth makes the sinning soul secure
> From all foes save itself, souls' truliest foe,—
> Since egg turned snake needs fear no serpentry.[2]

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[1] 'A Light Woman,' vol. i. 406.

[2] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Book and the Ring'), vol. ii. 287.

And how terribly true to life is that other picture in another section of the same great poem:

A wound i' the flesh no doubt wants prompt redress;
It smarts a little to-day, well in a week,
Forgotten in a month; or never, or now, revenge!
But a wound to the soul? That rankles worse and worse.[1]

Yes! whether the wound be deliberately inflicted by another, or by one's own hand in a moment of folly and weakness. Closely akin to the sentiment here embodied is that expressed in the lines of another poet —more vivid still:

Wounds of the soul, though healed, will ache,
The reddening scars remain and make confession;
Lost innocence returns no more;
We are not what we were before transgression.

And yet, Browning sees how even the most deeply stained soul may get back again its purity, if not its 'innocence.' It may have to suffer for its sin, the suffering may abide, but the sin itself

[1] 'Tertium Quid,' vol. ii. 85.

may be effaced, completely purged away :

> Here the blot is blanched
> By God's gift of a purity of soul
> That will not take pollution, ermine-like
> Armed from dishonour by its own soft snow.
> Such was this gift of God who showed for once
> How He would have the world go white.[1]

The character which the soul bears will, in some way or other, disclose itself. Not always and invariably, for

> God be thanked, the meanest of His creatures
> Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
> One to show a woman when he loves her![2]

Still, as Emerson says, 'dreadful limits are set in nature to the power of dissimulation.' There are times when, all unconsciously to itself, the soul declares what it really is, what is its true nature—its love or hate, esteem or scorn. Perhaps it is some articulate utterance that is the medium of revelation, as when our poet says :

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Pope'), vol. ii. 225.
[2] 'One Word More,' vol. i. 549.

He replied—
The first word I heard ever from his lips,
All himself in it,—an eternity
Of speech, to match the immeasurable depth
O' the soul that then broke silence—'I am yours.'[1]

Or, perhaps, the silence remains unbroken, but the disclosure is made, nevertheless, with

Each soul a-strain
Some one way through the flesh—the face, an evidence
O' the soul at work inside.[2]

When a man has 'base ends and speaks falsely, the eye is muddy and sometimes a-squint.' But when his soul is true and pure, 'his eye is as clear as the heavens,' and his face grows 'one luminosity,'—though, in the former case, he may never suspect that the question will be put to him, 'Why is thy countenance fallen?' And in the latter also it might truthfully be said, 'He wist not that the skin of his face shone.'

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Pompilia'), vol. ii. 167.
[2] 'Fifine at the Fair,' vol. ii. 356.

Finally, let it be remembered that the purified soul grows in goodness and in strength in spite of all the forces that antagonize it; or, let us rather say, *because of* those very antagonizing forces. Its victories are its own for ever. The effort of conflict results only in increased power to itself. It transmutes 'human clay to divine gold.' It finds the best in the worst, and appropriates it, and so is the gainer everlastingly.

I search but cannot see
What purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries
Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own
For ever, by some mode whereby shall be made known
The gain of every life. Death reads the title clear—
What each soul for itself conquered from out things here:
Since, in the seeing soul, all worth lies, I assert,—
And nought i' the world, which, save for soul that sees, inert
Was, is, and would be ever,—stuff for transmuting,—null
And void until man's breath evoke the beautiful—
But, touched aright, prompt yields each particle its tongue

Concerning the Soul

Of elemental flame,—no matter whence flame sprung
From gums and spice, or else from straw and rottenness,
So long as soul has power to make them burn, express
What lights and warms henceforth, leaves only ash behind,
Howe'er the chance: if soul be privileged to find
Food so soon that, by first snatch of eye, suck of breath,
It can absorb pure life: or, rather, meeting death
I' the shape of ugliness, by fortunate recoil
So put on its resource, it find therein a foil
For a new birth of life, the challenged soul's response
To ugliness and death,—creation for the nonce.
I gather heart through just such conquests of the soul.[1]

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[1] 'Fifine at the Fair,' vol. ii. 338.

V

CONCERNING FAITH

V

CONCERNING FAITH

'I believe in God and truth and love.'

'Pauline.'

'I trust in Nature . . . in God . . . in my own soul.' **'A Soul's Tragedy.'**

IN these two fragments we have the suggestion of the significance of the term Faith. It is not simply the 'belief' of the intellect, but also the 'trust' of the heart. The two do not always coexist. A man may assent to certain truths, and there pause. He may acknowledge the reality of certain spiritual entities, without giving to that which is involved in their

existence the whole confidence of his manhood. With Browning, however, it is not so. In his view the two go together. Their relationship is that of a natural sequence. He believes, and because he believes, he trusts. Indeed, to be absolutely accurate, perhaps it should rather be said that Browning's faith was an indivisible unity, that belief with him meant the consent of his entire nature, the agreement and harmony of all its powers in relation to that on which his faith was fixed. If definition be possible here, faith, for him, might be defined as being 'the sense of the unseen which detects, recognizes, loves, and trusts the goodness existing in numerous forms and persons in the world, and rises to its height in trusting Him who is its source and sum.'[1] Hence such lines as these in 'Bishop Blougram's Apology':

[1] *Vide* Watson's *Mind of the Master*, p. 142.

> Believe—and our whole argument breaks up.
> Enthusiasm's the best thing, I repeat;
> Only, we can't command it; fire and life
> Are all, dead matter's nothing, we agree:
> And be it a mad dream or God's very breath,
> The fact's the same,—belief's fire, once in us,
> Makes of all else mere stuff to show itself.[1]

To believe or disbelieve, then, is not a matter of indifference. It is a matter of life or death. There is a flippancy in relation to faith in certain quarters to-day, which can only end disastrously to those who are guilty of it. Men cast off the beliefs of their fathers as so many 'worn-out creeds and discredited dogmas,' apparently with more ease than they exhibit when throwing aside their old garments, and this, even if they have no substitute for that with which they so lightly part. There is no deep sense of responsibility, no recognition of the tremendous issues involved in the acceptance or rejection of the demands which the unseen makes upon them. With such a spirit Browning

[1] Vol. i. 535.

has no sympathy at all. The trifler would receive from him no mercy. He does sympathize with the serious, honest doubter, the victim of circumstances or the slave of a morbid temperament. One of the ablest exponents of his poetry[1] tells us how he himself was brought back from the dreary wastes of Agnosticism to the fertile places of the Christian faith by his study of these wonderful poems. But this surely is the result of the poet's own conception of the *seriousness* of belief or unbelief. I cannot but think that his personal attitude reveals itself when he says:

> If once we choose belief, on all accounts
> We can't be too decisive in our faith,
> Conclusive and exclusive in its terms,
> To suit the world which gives us the good things.
> In every man's career are certain points
> Whereon he dares not be indifferent;
> The world detects him clearly, if he dare,
> As baffled at the game, and losing life.[2]

And yet, again, what solemnity and

[1] Dr. Berdoe.

[2] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 532.

what strength are revealed in presence of the suggestion to 'eliminate' or 'decrassify' his faith!—

> Experimentalize on sacred things!
> I trust nor hand nor eye nor heart nor brain
> To stop betimes: they all get drunk alike.
> The first step, I am master not to take.[1]

To discuss *all* the *objects* of Browning's faith would carry us far beyond the limits of a single chapter, and in some other parts of this volume these objects frequently and necessarily appear. But I cannot omit in this place a reference to a passage which takes us to the very heart of the Christian religion, and is so comprehensive that we can afford to let it stand here alone:

> What is the point where Himself [i.e. Christ] lays stress?
> Does the precept run 'Believe in good,
> In justice, truth, now understood
> For the first time'?—or, 'Believe in Me,
> Who lived and died, yet essentially
> Am Lord of Life'? Whoever can take
> The same to his heart and for mere love's sake

[1] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 538.

Conceive of the love,—that man obtains
A new truth; no conviction gains
Of an old one only, made intense
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.[1]

In 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' a poem which 'shows how lenient the poet could be to the honest half-believer,' there is more than a suggestion that the difficulties which beset both Faith and Unbelief may find their solution when into the range of the soul's vision there comes the form of the Son of God. The picture is that of a man shaken 'by fits' with belief and doubt, ever and anon thus disturbed, recognizing the apparent incongruities of human life, restless in the recognition, and looking for some solid rock on which to plant his feet amid the shifting sand. The only secure place that is indicated is the Rock of Ages. Here man's spirit *may* rest, here Faith *may* find its one satisfying object, and the clamour of Unbelief *may* be silenced:

[1] 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day,' vol. i. 492.

Concerning Faith

And now what are we? unbelievers both,
Calm and complete, determinately fixed
To-day, to-morrow and for ever, pray?
You'll guarantee me that? Not so, I think!
In no wise! all we've gained is, that belief,
As unbelief before, shakes us by fits,
Confounds us like its predecessor. Where's
The gain? how can we guard our unbelief,
Make it bear fruit to us?—the problem here.
Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are—
This good God,—what He could do, if He would,
Would, if He could—then must have done long since:
If so, when, where and how? some way must be,—
Once feel about, and soon or late you hit
Some sense, in which it might be, after all.
Why not, 'The Way, the Truth, the Life'?[1]

The *effect* of Faith (in the sense in which Browning uses the word) upon character and life will not for a moment be questioned. 'Belief or unbelief,' he says, 'bears upon life, determines its whole

[1] Vol. i. 531.

course.' The philosophy which encourages an opposite view reveals only its own shallowness. It fails either to discern the meaning of the terms it employs, or to take proper account of the facts with which it professes to deal. It is true, of course, that 'some of our beliefs — poetical, mythological, speculative — little influence us in matters of conduct, but here we have to do with fancy rather than with faith: whatever a man *really* believes, whatever theory of the world he finds himself constrained to accept, whatever interpretation he gives to human life whatever type of character secures his sanction and admiration, whatever may be his ultimate hope or fear, inevitably fashions his character and colours his action day by day and hour by hour. What we believe with our whole heart is of the highest consequence to us, and to teach the contrary is to divest thought and conviction of reality and serious sig-

nificance — is indeed to avow the utter irrationality of life.'

So writes the Rev. W. L. Watkinson in the introduction to a volume,[1] in which he seeks to show how debasing in many ways are the effects of unbelief upon those who have avowed it. He supports his contention by reference to history, to the current treatment of morals in sceptical schools, and to several representative modern sceptics. The principle thus laid down and amply sustained and illustrated is but the elaboration of the teaching of Browning in these striking lines:

> See the world
> Such as it is,—you made it not, nor I;
> I mean to take it as it is,—and you,
> Not so you'll take it,—though you get nought else.
> I know the special kind of life I like,
> What suits the most my idiosyncrasy,
> Brings out the best of me and bears me fruit
> In power, peace, pleasantness and length of days.
> I find that positive belief does this
> For me, and unbelief, no whit of this.
> —For you, it does, however?—that, we'll try![2]

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[1] *The Influence of Scepticism on Character.*

[2] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 531.

And the trial, as may be imagined, has but one result.

The *conflict* of a life of faith is inevitable. 'A scientific faith 's absurd':

> You must mix some uncertainty
> With faith, if you would have faith be.[1]

Hence it comes to pass that all along through our mortal existence there must be struggle. We are accustomed to speak of the *repose* of faith. There is such a thing, but even that is the outcome of strife. It is the peace of victory. Still, no victory here is final. 'Each victory will help you some other to win.' That is the purpose of all struggle, of all conquest. Let it not be supposed that unbelief is more restful than faith — it is not:

> All we have gained then by our unbelief
> Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
> For one of faith diversified by doubt:
> We called the chess-board white,—we call it black.[2]

[1] 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day,' vol. i. 497.
[2] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 531.

But let the strife proceed; and if a man be true to the best he knows, doubt will not injure him—it will prove a blessing in disguise, for it will eventually confirm and strengthen him in the faith to which he has held fast:

> The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,
> If faith o'ercomes doubt.[1]

And all this, be it observed, is consistent with the highest blessedness. Faith predominant in the soul, in spite of the assaults of unbelief, will mean for that soul the possession of a good to which the faithless are totally strange. Unbelief brings no real advantage anywhere:

> What can I gain on the denying side?
> Ice makes no conflagration . . .
> Strauss may be wrong. And so a risk is run—
> For what gain? Not for Luther's, who secured
> A real heaven in his heart throughout his life,
> Supposing death a little altered things.[2]

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[1] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 536.
[2] Ibid., vol. i. 536.

'Doubt is all very well if it serve the purpose of leading us to faith; but a life of doubt is a miserable, starved, and deranged existence.' So Dr. Berdoe, taught unquestionably by his great master. Thus:

Friends,
I absolutely and peremptorily
Believe!—I say, faith is my waking life:
One sleeps, indeed, and dreams at intervals,
We know, but waking's the main point with us,
And my provision's for life's waking part.
Accordingly, I use heart, head and hand
All day, I build, scheme, study, and make friends;
And when night overtakes me, down I lie,
Sleep, dream a little, and get done with it,
The sooner the better, to begin afresh.
What's midnight doubt before the dayspring's faith?[1]

[1] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 532.

VI

CONCERNING HOPE

VI

CONCERNING HOPE

'We are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?' ST. PAUL.

'Hope to the end' (Gr. 'perfectly').

ST. PETER.

THERE is one poem, 'At the Mermaid,' in which Browning denounces two views, which some people persist in holding. One is, that an author, even in his dramatic productions, necessarily reveals himself; and the other, with which at the moment we are chiefly concerned, is that a poet is essentially a man of melancholy and gloom!

In regard to this latter, he tells us he can only speak for himself. Others may have found their life distasteful, their joys growing less with the on-coming of the years, the whole aspect of things wearing for them a sombre hue, which gradually deepens until the light has quite passed away from them, and nothing but darkness remains: but 'I,' he says,

> I find earth not grey but rosy,
> Heaven not grim but fair of hue.
> Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.
> Do I stand and stare? All's blue.[1]

It was not necessary for our poet to tell us that in so many words. The whole spirit of his writings assures us that that was the atmosphere in which he lived. So true, indeed, is this, that Dr. Bruce, in his fine series of lectures on *The Moral Order of the World in Ancient and Modern Thought*, selects Browning as his English expounder of optimism, 'the greatest

[1] Vol. ii. 478.

modern apostle of that buoyant, hope-inspiring creed.'

Hopefulness with him was the normal condition of life. He could sympathize with despondency, he could depict it in all its terrible effects; but he himself, even if he fell under its power for a brief space of time, could not by any possibility remain its victim. His nature rebelled against the creed of despair, and asserted its allegiance to the Angel of Hope.

When a man avows himself a pessimist, Browning would seem to question his absolute sincerity. That, I think, is hinted at in one of the stanzas in 'The Worst of It'—a poem in which we have the cry of anguish of a man whose wife has been false to him. That falseness has shaken his faith in all truth and purity and beauty, until he feels that he has entered into an alliance with the devil, and can wish for nothing better for all that lives than—death! But, even in the expression of

that wish, he thinks he may be uttering a lie, he doubts himself, he is sceptical as to the very pessimism into which, by his sad experiences, he has been plunged.[1]

In 'Paracelsus,' again, we have another illustration of the hopefulness which, in the poet's view, is inherent in man's nature. He falls ever and anon into the Slough of Despond in the course of his pilgrimage, but he will surely escape therefrom, and will bear within him the conviction, never quite quenched, that at the end of the journey lies the celestial city, though it may not yet appear in sight. What depths of depression are revealed in the lines :

> I give the fight up ; let there be an end,
> A privacy, an obscure nook for me.
> I want to be forgotten even by God![2]

But *that* is not the true self of Paracelsus. That is a momentary lapse from which he will recover, and presently disclose his real character. So, even at the

[1] *Vide* vol. i. 573. [2] Vol. i. 65.

end of his disappointing life, we have this superb utterance:

> If I stoop
> Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
> It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
> Close to my breast; its splendour, soon or late,
> Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day.[1]

There are just four points which are worthy of notice in regard to this great principle or emotion of the soul.

1. The first is — Hope in relation to *one's own future.* Nowhere, perhaps, is that more beautifully illustrated than in the noontide scene in 'Pippa Passes.' Phene, a Greek girl, has become the wife of Jules, a French sculptor. The union is the result of a cruel joke practised upon him by some students who owed him a grudge; and the sculptor finds, when it is too late, 'that the refined woman by whom he fancied himself loved is but an ignorant girl of the lowest class, of whom also his enemies have made a tool. Her remorse

[1] Vol. i. 72.

at seeing what man she had deceived disarms his anger, and marks the dawning of a moral sense in her.'[1] And this is what she says:

> You creature with the eyes!
> If I could look for ever up to them,
> As now you let me,—I believe, all sin,
> All memory of wrong done, suffering borne,
> Would drop down, low and lower, to the earth
> Whence all that's low comes, and there touch and stay
> —Never to overtake the rest of me,
> All that, unspotted, reaches up to you,
> Drawn by those eyes! What rises is myself,
> Not me the shame and suffering; but they sink,
> Are left, I rise above them. Keep me so,
> Above the world![2]

Both he and she are saved.

It is characteristic of Browning to depict the unworthy, the evil, as being left behind in the onward march of life, and in pursuit of an ideal, so that at last only the good, the best, survives; it is equally characteristic for him to inspire men by showing to them the prospect for themselves, in their own individual lives. The goal, however,

[1] Mrs. Orr. [2] Vol. i. 207.

is not reached in a day, neither is it attained without much struggle or many falls. The path to the realization of the object of hope is never a smooth one. But, for the earnest soul, the hope itself cannot be destroyed, cannot be wholly blotted out. It springs eternal in the breast;

> All men hope, and see their hopes
> Frustrate, and grieve awhile, and hope anew.[1]

2. Then a second phase of this same theme is—Hope in relation to *the world*, even under its most sinful and repellent aspect. Dr. Westcott has told us—what those who are acquainted with the poet's works will recognize as a statement of fact—that Browning 'has dared to look on the darkest and meanest forms of action and passion, from which we commonly and rightly turn our eyes, and he has brought back for us, from this universal survey, a conviction of hope.' As a single specimen of this, we may refer to the scene described

[1] 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,' vol. i. 346.

in the brief poem bearing the title, 'Apparent Failure.' It is a picture of the Morgue in Paris, into which the poet entered to gaze upon the ghastly spectacles that there presented themselves—the bodies of men who hated life, or whose ideals were shattered, or whose hearts were broken. And, after plucking up courage to look fearlessly upon them all, trying to conceive what such a sight represented, *how* each victim came to meet with his terrible fate, he sums up his reflections thus:

> My own hope is, a sun will pierce
> The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
> That, after Last, returns the First,
> Though a wide compass round be fetched;
> That what began best, can't end worst,
> Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.[1]

It is possible, of course, to interpret such words as these as revealing a special theological bias in relation to the future life, but that, I think, would be unfair. In

[1] Vol. i. 625.

such a case we should surely be guilty of an injustice in regard to the poet's thought and feeling.

It would not be difficult to show that he believed in the punishment of sin in a very real and terrible sense, in the mysterious Beyond. So that it is enough to say here, that, in the lines above quoted, there is no theological creed, but simply the expression of a divinely imparted thought and desire, prompted by the love which 'hopeth all things.'

3. And this leads me to say, that the poet's persistent optimism had, for its source and unfailing inspiration, the certainty that God *is*, and that 'God is love.' He would have us say to ourselves, what scarcely seemed necessary for him to say to himself, 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? *hope thou in God!*' (Ps. xlii. 11).

It is not without significance that Pompilia tells us how in her distress she

was thus sustained, how she held by her prayer to God, and the hope that came in answer to her prayer—a hope that was fulfilled beyond her most sanguine expectation.[1] Similarly, as we have pointed out in an earlier chapter, Abt Vogler, the musician, when all his earthly dreams have vanished, and the palace of music he had reared had been overthrown, is yet saved from despair by the remembrance of the 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,' 'whose builder and maker is God.'[2]

Mildred, in 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,' crushed beneath the load of her 'guilt,' still finds one prop on which she can lean, and which saves her from sinking down utterly:

> God seems indulgent, and I dare
> Trust Him my soul in sleep.[3]

In 'Old Pictures in Florence' there are two lines full of suggestiveness, in con-

[1] *Vide* line 617, vol. ii. 155. [2] *Vide* vol. i. 579.
[3] Vol. i. 345.

nexion with that part of the subject with which we are now dealing. The poet tells us of the happiness of those who labour

> With upturned eye while the hand is busy;

and then he goes on to say,

> 'Tis looking downward that makes one dizzy.[1]

Is there not in these lines a whole philosophy of life, from the Christian point of view? Let a man's gaze be diverted from that which is above him, and be turned to that which is beneath or even that which is around him, and it will mean, not dizziness only, but stumbling and falling. Let him, on the other hand, fasten his attention on the Master, whose he is and whom he serves, and to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth, and, in the face of the greatest obstacles, in the darkest, cloudiest day, he will never lose heart or hope, but

[1] Vol. i. 268.

move steadily forward in the fulfilment of his allotted task. He will endure 'as seeing Him who is invisible.'

4. And so we come to glance for a moment at *the effect of the possession of Hope upon character*. That effect is manifold, but there is only one feature resulting therefrom that I mention, which nevertheless includes many others in itself —and that is, courage.

It would not, perhaps, be true to say that fearlessness is always the product of hope; it *is* true to say that, where hope is, fear cannot be. Hope, in the deepest, truest sense of the word, 'casteth out fear, because fear hath torment.'

Bunyan, in his great classic, makes this clear to us, in his delineation of the man whom he names Hopeful. In the dungeon of Giant Despair, with his companion, Christian, it is the younger pilgrim who consoles and enheartens the older. And when the two enter together

the last river, and Christian cries out, 'I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head,' Hopeful calmly replies, 'Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom, and it is good.'

The despondent man will always see lions in the way, real or imaginary, and be correspondingly terrified. The man who sees things as they are, and so discerns the forces that conspire to help him as well as those that are against him, will face all adversity in the spirit of a conqueror. Hence the wisdom contained in this couplet from 'Herakles':

> That man's bravest, therefore, who hopes on,
> Hopes ever: to despair is coward-like.[1]

It is sometimes said that one reason why St. Paul, when naming the three graces, declares that the 'greatest' of them is love, is that love is eternal, and faith and hope are not. I am not pre-

[1] Vol. i. 715.

pared to admit that. There may be a sense, of course, in which

> Faith is swallowed up in sight,
> And hope in full supreme delight,

but that certainly does not mean that there will no longer be any room or any need for the exercise of these faculties of the soul! Is there not for the Christian a true Biblical doctrine of eternal hope? Not only when he is growing old, but also when he has entered upon the life of perpetual youth, he may still, as we think, and always, unhesitatingly affirm:

> The best is yet to be.[1]

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[1] 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' vol. i. 581.

VII

CONCERNING LOVE

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CONCERNING LOVE

'Browning nowhere shows his native strength more clearly than in his treatment of love. He has touched this world-old theme — which almost every poet has handled, and handled in his highest manner—with that freshness and insight which is possible only to the inborn originality of genius.'

JONES.

ST. PAUL, in a well-known passage, says of Jesus Christ, He 'loved me, and gave Himself up for me.' The two parts of that sentence are not distinct and separable. Where the first is, the second must be also. Love always means the

giving up of self. 'Love is not a matter merely of the feeling, nor certainly merely of the imagination. True love dwells in the deepest roots of the will.' So writes the German apologist, Luthardt, and he continues thus: 'To love is, first of all, not to seek self. Love is self-denial, and is in virtue thereof the opposite of self-ishness.'

Tennyson also, in familiar lines, follows in the wake of the apostle and the theologian, when he tells us that

> Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all
> the chords with might;
> Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling,
> pass'd in music out of sight.

Unfortunately the word 'love' has been prostituted from this, its high and true significance, and too frequently has been applied to a passing whim or fancy, or a transient emotion of the soul. Even the poets have not been wholly guiltless here. Indeed, it may perhaps be due in some

measure to them that the ideals of love have sometimes been so low, and that the word itself has been so loosely and carelessly employed. Such a charge, however, can never be truthfully made against Browning. However unworthily others may have treated this great theme, he has always discerned its lofty character. Professor Jones has dared to say that 'in one thing Browning stands alone. He has given to love a moral significance, a place and power amongst those substantial elements, on which rest the dignity of man's being and the greatness of his destiny, in a way which is, I believe, without example in any other poet.'[1]

Our first illustration of that is to be found in 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'—'the simplest and perhaps the deepest and finest of Mr. Browning's plays.' The speaker, in the

[1] *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, p. 150.

passage that follows, is Earl Tresham, the head of a great house, proud of his name and his ancestry, tender and devoted to his sister, who shares his home. It is to her that he speaks, revealing the depths of his own heart, all unconscious of any seeming egotism. They have conversed together of the love of father, mother, husband, and he says:

> Mildred, I do believe a brother's love
> For a sole sister must exceed them all.
> For see now, only see! there's no alloy
> Of earth that creeps into the perfect'st gold
> Of other loves—no gratitude to claim;
> You never gave her life, not even aught
> That keeps life—never tended her, instructed,
> Enriched her—so, your love can claim no right
> O'er her save pure love's claim: that's what I call
> Freedom from earthliness. . . .
> I think such love, (apart from yours and mine),
> Contented with its little term of life,
> Intending to retire betimes, aware
> How soon the background must be place for it,
> —I think, am sure, a brother's love exceeds
> All the world's love in its unworldliness.[1]

What is especially noticeable here, in addition to the general thought embodied

[1] Vol. i. 341.

in these exquisite lines, is the attitude assumed by the speaker. He seeks to detach himself and all thought of himself from the theme with which he deals—as evidenced by that parenthetical clause, 'apart from yours and mine'—and so heightens the effect of the picture of the unselfishness of the love which he portrays. It is the same conception that we have in a couplet in 'Pippa Passes':

> Lovers grow cold, men learn to hate their wives,
> And only parents' love can last our lives;[1]

though one must not accept as a literal statement of fact the assertion of the first of these two lines. The purpose of the sharp and rugged contrast is simply to extol that principle from which all consideration of self has vanished.

The supremacy of love, its differentiation from many other things which men rightly count dear, is finely taught in the

[1] Vol. i. 197.

drama entitled 'Colombe's Birthday.' The point on which the action of the play turns is this. Colombe of Ravenstein is ostensibly Duchess of Juliers and Cleves. On the first anniversary of her accession to the duchy—which is also her birthday—a rival claimant appears in the person of Prince Berthold, who proves to be the rightful heir. To save complications, however, he offers to marry her—that offer conveying with it the promise of all the wealth and honour that will eventually be his. 'You love me, then?' queries the Duchess, and the Prince answers:

> Your lineage I revere,
> Honour your virtue, in your truth believe,
> Do homage to your intellect, and bow
> Before your peerless beauty.
> *The Duchess.* But, for love—
> *Berthold.* A further love I do not understand.[1]

And, in saying that, he revealed the inferiority of his nature, a spirit in which

[1] Vol. i. 378.

self held the uppermost place, and carried complete and uninterrupted sway.

As a set-off against the cold, unworthy heartlessness disclosed by the Prince, there is a picture in 'Sordello' of the genuine passion of the soul when it is free from all the sordid elements that would debase it. See in this the modesty and humility, and at the same time the magnificent ideals, of the love which seeketh not its own! Every phrase tells:

> Love is whole
> And true; if sure of nought beside, most sure
> Of its own truth at least; nor may endure
> A crowd to see its face, that cannot know
> How hot the pulses throb its heart below:
> While its own helplessness and utter want
> Of means to worthily be ministrant
> To what it worships, do but fan the more
> Its flame, exalt the idol far before
> Itself as it would have it ever be.[1]

We have been made familiar with the phrase, 'the greatest thing in the world,' as applied to the subject of this chapter. Browning is not satisfied with that. He

[1] Vol. i. 124–5.

does not say simply that love is the *summum bonum.* He goes farther and declares, through one of his characters, that it is 'the *only* good in the world.' And is there not a sense in which even that is profoundly true? Are not all other desirable things relatively worthless if this be wanting? Can any other thing be entirely satisfactory, can it be really 'good,' without this? So, when the Queen addresses her cousin and dependant in the poem entitled 'In a Balcony,' she is not speaking merely for women, as she says, but for all human beings. Her heart has been starved and withered, she has grown old and unattractive, but when, as she supposes, this solitary career of hers is to end, she cries:

> There is no good of life but love—but love!
> What else looks good, is some shade flung from love;
> Love gilds it, gives it worth. Be warned by me,
> Never you cheat yourself one instant! Love,
> Give love, ask only love, and leave the rest![1]

This is further illustrated and enforced

[1] Vol. i. 555.

in two suggestive fragments of 'Colombe's Birthday,' to which we have referred above. A second suitor for the hand of the Duchess of Juliers was one Valence, a poor advocate of Cleves, the Prince Berthold being the first. The choice of the Duchess lay, therefore, between the wealthy duchy and lovelessness, on the one hand, and comparative poverty and true affection on the other. And, when it seemed that she inclined to the former, the ardent and noble Valence soliloquized thus :

Her first and last decision !—me, she leaves,
Takes him ; a simple heart is flung aside,
The ermine o'er a heartless breast embraced.
O Heaven, this mockery has been played too oft !
Once, to surprise the angels—twice, that fiends
Recording, might be proud they chose not so—
Thrice, many thousand times, to teach the world
All men should pause, misdoubt their strength, since men
Can have such chance yet fail so signally,
—But ever, ever this farewell to Heaven,
Welcome to earth—this taking death for life—
This spurning love and kneeling to the world—
O Heaven, it is too often and too old ![1]

[1] Vol. i. 380.

But he was mistaken. That was not 'her first and last decision.' What the decision was, was registered in these words:

> I take him [Valence]—give up Juliers and the world. This is my Birthday.[1]

Yes! her birthday, indeed—the real beginning of her nobler life. For, until true love reveals itself in the soul and dominates all things else, that soul is a blank:

> He looked at her, as a lover can;
> She looked at him, as one who awakes:
> The past was a sleep, and her life began.[2]

It is worth while to spend a moment or two in looking at the poet's conception of *the relation of love to faith.* We have, perhaps, been accustomed to think of faith as taking the precedence of love—I mean in point of time. I will not say that that does not represent the fact in any sense at all. But I do say that the converse is distinctly true, namely, that faith follows

[1] Vol. i. 381.
[2] 'The Statue and the Bust,' vol. i. 431.

love, and makes its presence known as it could not do if love were wanting. The more we dwell upon it, the more clearly shall we see that St. Peter was right when he said, '*Above all things* have fervent love among yourselves,' for the simple reason that *it* cannot stand alone, that in its train will follow all other qualities which adorn and make life beautiful:

'Love'
Is a short word that says so very much!
It says that you confide in me.[1]

And confidence—that means quietness, repose, patience, gentleness, and a host of virtues almost too numerous to mention.

Browning will not admit that love is blind, and *therefore* confiding. There may be a sense in which it is 'neighbourly to all unreasonableness,' but that is not because it sees less, but rather more, than the unloving soul. The vision of love and the vision of faith are one, or, more accurately,

[1] 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon,' vol. i. 345.

the latter is included in the former, the former being always broader and more penetrating than the other:

> Nought blinds you less than admiration, friend!
> Whether it be that all love renders wise
> In its degree; from love which blends with love—
> Heart answering heart—to love which spends itself
> In silent mad idolatry of some
> Pre-eminent mortal, some great soul of souls,
> Which ne'er will know how well it is adored.
> I say, such love is never blind; but rather
> Alive to every the minutest spot
> Which mars its object, and which hate (supposed
> So vigilant and searching) dreams not of.[1]

The relation of love to knowledge is also a noteworthy theme in the work of our poet. This is dealt with at considerable length in 'Paracelsus,' one main purpose of which was to show the failure of knowledge alone to satisfy the soul. Browning does not hesitate to affirm that a man, whatever his intellectual acquisitions, is not truly a man, but a monster, if those stores of knowledge represent the sum of his life:

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 47–8.

I can no longer seek
To overlook the truth, that there would be
A monstrous spectacle upon the earth,
Beneath the pleasant sun, among the trees:
—A being knowing not what love is.[1]

Not that love excludes knowledge in any true human life. That also were a most lamentable defect.

The two elements must coexist, each the essential complement of the other. Paracelsus has aspired *to know.* Aprile, another poet introduced into the poem, has refused to know. *He* has loved—blindly, immoderately, and, when he is dying, Paracelsus addresses to him these words:

Die not, Aprile! We must never part.
Are we not halves of one dissevered world,
Whom this strange chance unites once more? Part? never!
Till thou the lover, know; and I, the knower,
Love—until both are saved.[2]

The same theme reappears in 'A Pillar at Sebzevar,' one of the twelve sections comprised under the general title of 'Fer-

[1] Vol. i. 25. [2] Vol. i. 36.

ishtah's Fancies.' It is acknowledged that Ferishtah represents Browning himself, and in this particular section of the poem he lays down the proposition that the value of knowledge is uncertain, and its pursuit disappointing, while love is always, and apart from anything else, a sure gain. When he was a boy, he says, his curls were crowned with knowledge, but one crown was displaced by another, less knowledge by greater, and this process went on continually, so that what he thought knowledge at a given stage was presently discovered to be ignorance. Love, on the contrary, once possessed, is always possessed. Nothing can supersede it, nothing can lessen its value. It is not, as knowledge may be, the assurance of victory, sometime, somewhere; it *is* victory; it is not a pressing toward the goal for the prize; it *is* the goal and the prize in one.[1]

[1] *Vide* vol. ii. 674.

Concerning Love

The great quest of life, the secret of eternal life, is to know God. This is the summit of all knowledge. This is the Alpine peak which towers above all the little hills on every side. To scale its lofty heights is the deepest longing of the noblest souls, and an achievement that is felt to be worthy of the aspiration of the keenest minds. But to reach that goal is never a feat of the intellect merely. It will grow weary, if it be alone, in its fruitless search for the Invisible, in its toilsome journey up those rugged steeps that lead to God, and eventually it will abandon its task in despair of ever accomplishing it. The path of the intellect is not the path that brings the soul into that Sacred Presence which it seeks. He is reached by another means altogether. What is it? Let the soul take to itself the 'wings of love,' and the distance between it and Him will be covered in a moment. The

mountain will become a plain, and He who seemed to be afar off will be found to be nigh at hand. Or, to use the figure which the poet actually employs, love is the single 'leap' that gains Him, which leap the mere intellectual faculty is powerless to take.[1]

And if that be true, can there be a moment's hesitation in subscribing to the dictum of St. Paul: 'Though I understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and have not love, I am nothing'?

There is one other comparison or contrast, in some sense linked with that which we have just been considering, to which we should give a little attention—and it is the comparison or contrast between *love and power*. Paracelsus believed that knowledge is power, and it was that that kindled and kept alive for a time his transcendent ambition. And when he was defeated, when his mistake had become

[1] *Vide* vol. ii. 676.

clear to him, it was natural that he should say :

> What wonder if I saw no way to shun
> Despair? The power I sought for man, seemed
> God's.

But he had learned a deeper lesson than that. He had come to see that there is a force surpassing in its majesty and might any that could possibly accrue from the acquisition of boundless stores of learning :

> I saw Aprile—my Aprile there!
> And as the poor melodious wretch disburthened
> His heart, and moaned his weakness in my ear,
> I learned my own deep error; love's undoing
> Taught me the worth of love in man's estate,
> And what proportion love should hold with power
> In his right constitution; love preceding
> Power, and with much power, always much more
> love;
> Love still too straitened in his present means,
> And earnest for new power to set love free.[1]

That lesson is for most of us a difficult one to learn. It is acquired, as a rule,

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 71.

only after much experience. Sometimes it is not learned at all in this world. The child, the youth, the man, are all impressed by the power, manifestations of which are to be seen on every hand. It does not present itself at each stage in life under the same aspect, or in the same guise, but it is there all the time. In our earlier years we are most fascinated by physical power, later on by the power of the intellect or the power of public opinion, or perchance by the power of some one outstanding, gifted man—but it is still power! The day will come, however, if our higher development be not arrested, when another vision will fill our souls, and all the things that are will be discerned in their true proportions. And then it will be seen that love is equally real, equally persistent, equally strong with power — of any kind whatsoever; that it is indeed, and always has been, in itself, and when all 'the facts are taken into

account, the mightiest force accessible to man.'[1]

And this leads us to the last point to be considered, namely, *the Eternity of Love.* The thought which this phrase embodies is suggested and elaborated from three different points of view in the poems, 'Cristina,' 'Evelyn Hope,' and 'The Last Ride Together.' Perhaps we may say that there is also one point of view common to all these poems; and it is this, that in the present life love can never be fully realized. It may be thwarted quickly, almost at its beginning, by circumstances or by death, or it may run its course for a while with partial success, in the mingling of soul with soul, but, in any case, its sphere of action is limited, and because it is so divine a thing—a heaven-born principle—this cannot represent the whole term of its existence. In the two latter poems, above mentioned, this is most

[1] *Vide* 'Reverie,' vol. ii. 772.

clearly brought out. Says the lover of the dead Evelyn Hope:

> God above
> Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
> And creates the love to reward the love:
> I claim you still, for my own love's sake!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> So hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep:
> See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!
> There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
> You will wake, and remember, and understand.[1]

And, in 'The Last Ride Together,' the lover cherishes the same hope concerning himself and his beloved, that the lives unfulfilled here will find their completion hereafter:

> And Heaven just prove that I and she
> Ride, ride together, for ever ride.[2]

But the most beautiful setting of this glorious thought is to be found in 'Christmas Eve,' in lines replete with the noblest sentiment and the most profoundly religious spirit:

> Love which, on earth, amid all the shows of it,
> Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it,

[1] Vol. i. 260–1. [2] Vol. i. 408.

Concerning Love

The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it,
  Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it.
And I shall behold Thee, face to face,
O God, and in Thy light retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast Thou!
Whom pressing to, then, as I fain would now,
I shall find as able to satiate
  The love, Thy gift, as my spirit's wonder
Thou art able to quicken and sublimate,
  With this sky of Thine, that I now walk under,
And glory in Thee for, as I gaze
Thus, thus! Oh, let men keep their ways
Of seeking Thee in a narrow shrine—
Be this my way! And this is mine![1]

So I summed up my new resolves:
  Too much love there can never be.[2]

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[1] 'Christmas Eve,' vol. i. 484. [2] Ibid., vol. i. 488.

VIII

CONCERNING TRUTH

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CONCERNING TRUTH

'Well, now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world good except truth.'

'The Ring and the Book.'

'Least, largest, there's one law for all the minds,
Here or above: be true at any price!'

'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.'

FREDERICK W. ROBERTSON, in discoursing on the words of Jesus, 'To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth,' says: 'Truth is here used in a sense equivalent to reality—for "truth" substitute reality, and it will become more intelligible. For

"the truth" is an ambiguous expression, limited in its application, meaning often nothing more than a theological creed, or a few dogmas of a creed which this or that party have agreed to call "the truth." It would indeed fritter down the majesty of the Redeemer's life, to say that He was a witness for the truth of any number of theological dogmas. Himself, His life, were a witness to Truth in the sense of Reality. The realities of life—the realities of the universe—to these His every act and word bore testimony. He was as much a witness to the truth of the purity of domestic life as to the truth of the doctrine of the Incarnation; to the truth of Goodness being identical with Greatness as much as to the doctrine of the Trinity—and more—His mind corresponded with Reality as the dial with the sun.'[1]

Ruskin, also, in his *Seven Lamps of*

[1] 'Sermons,' 1st series, p. 280.

Architecture, in the chapter on 'The Lamp of Truth,' has this illustrative sentence: 'To cover brick with cement, and to divide this cement with joints that it may look like stone, is to tell a falsehood.'[1]

These quotations will throw some light upon Browning's conception of this great theme. Truthfulness is for him not merely synonymous with veracity, 'a correspondence between words and thoughts.' It is not simply concerned with speech as expressive of beliefs or convictions—it goes deeper; it is a thing that affects the whole life, 'a correspondence between thoughts and realities.'

In this large sense, there is in man the instinctive perception or recognition of the truth. Truth is not something alien to his nature, something altogether apart from him, and which he must struggle incessantly to reach:

[1] P. 82.

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes all error: and to KNOW
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without. Watch narrowly
The demonstration of a truth, its birth,
And you trace back the effluence to its spring
And source within us; where broods radiance vast,
To be elicited ray by ray, as chance
Shall favour.[1]

The explanation of this—the philosophy of it, if you will so call it—is found in another poem:

Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though He is so bright and we so dim,
We are made in His image to witness Him.[2]

Herein we find, too, the secret of the universal longing of the noblest hearts:

I cannot feed on beauty for the sake
Of beauty only, nor can drink in balm

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 26. [2] 'Christmas Eve,' vol. i. 492.

From lovely objects for their loveliness;
My nature cannot lose her first imprint;
I still must hoard and heap and class all truths
With one ulterior purpose: I must know![1]

But the knowledge, be it observed, is not for its own sake alone. It must lead to corresponding action. It is inimical to all mere semblance, all unreality. Following its guidance, the enlightened soul will abhor a 'lie' in any shape or form:

Let us do so—aspire to live as these
In harmony with truth, ourselves being true![2]

And yet, such is the subtlety, the complexity, or perhaps one ought rather to say the perverseness, of human nature, that though it bears the image of truth, never altogether effaced, too often that image is marred and spoiled by falsehood and error until it is scarcely possible to

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 46.
[2] 'In a Balcony,' vol. i. 553.

determine which are the real and essential characteristics of the man concerned. Victor Hugo says of Jean Valjean, in *Les Miserables*, that he 'had this peculiarity: that he might be said to carry two knapsacks; in one he had the thoughts of a saint, in the other the formidable talents of a convict'; and that 'he helped himself from one or the other as occasion required.' It may be a peculiarity to have a saint's 'thoughts' side by side with a convict's 'talents' in one and the same person, but the two kinds of *character*, the highest and the lowest, are more or less mingled in us all. Is not that the teaching of the poet, where he says—

> To truth a pretty homage thus we pay
> By testifying—what we dally with,
> Falsehood, (which, never fear we take for truth!)
> We may enjoy, but then—how we despise![1]

[1] 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country,' vol. ii. 389.

Or again:

> Truth I say, truth I mean: this love was true,
> And the rest happened by due consequence.
> By which we are to learn that there exists
> A falsish false, for truth's inside the same,
> And truth that's only half true, falsish truth.[1]

And because this is so, it comes to pass that a man must wrestle and work for the truth, must win it by strenuous, persistent effort, inspired by the assurance that 'o'er falsehood truth is surely sphered, o'er ugliness beams beauty,' and that always 'truth shines athwart the lies.' Thus we have the picture in 'Paracelsus':

> Night is come,
> And I betake myself to study again,
> Till patient searchings after hidden lore
> Half wring some bright truth from its prison; my frame
> Trembles, my forehead's veins swell out, my hair
> Tingles for triumph.[2]

Following from these facts—that truth is so often mingled with falsehood, and that it must be wrought for if it is to be obtained—there is the advocacy of toler-

[1] 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country,' vol. ii. 390.
[2] Vol. i. 56.

ance, of a large-souled charity in dealing with the earnest truth-seeker:

> Lied is a rough phrase: say he fell from truth
> In climbing towards it![1]

And then, how insistence on this spirit, side by side with the most rigid and unbending antagonism to falsehood, comes out in the fine lines in the same poem:

> Dost thou blame
> A soul that strives but to see plain, speak true,
> Truth at all hazards? Oh, this false for real,
> This emptiness which feigns solidity,—
> Ever some grey that's white, and dun that's black,—
> When shall we rest upon the thing itself
> Not on its semblance?—Soul—too weak, forsooth,
> To cope with fact—wants fiction everywhere!
> Mine tires of falsehood: truth at any cost![2]

If man were infinite in capacity, if his vision were unlimited in its range, and if he saw all things with absolute clearness, no allowance could be made for any want of truth. It is our limitations that lead us into error, and that call forth in others the exercise of the spirit of forbearance. That

[1] 'A Bean-Stripe, &c.,' vol. ii. 680. [2] Ibid.

which is to some men perfectly clear and plain may be to their fellows altogether misty and obscure. By all of us the truth is but gradually perceived; sometimes, indeed, with painful slowness it dawns upon us, and in the process of its apprehension we differ one from another beyond all calculation. We are moving, maybe, to the same goal, but not by the same path, and certainly *haud passibus aequis*. This the poet recognizes to the full. For example, he 'seems to say that proud as are the artist and the poet of their possession of and power of expressing so much truth, the musician is still closer to the divine':

> God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear;
> The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.[1]

And as to the general method by which truth is apprehended and acquired, what could be more suggestive than one of the

[1] 'Abt Vogler,' vol. i. 580.

short poems in 'Asolando,' in which the speaker marks the different stages by which he passed to his mature knowledge and understanding of things, receiving his first lessons from his father?—

> Who knew better than turn straight
> Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance,
> Or, worse yet, leave weak eyes to grow sand-blind,
> Content with darkness and vacuity;[1]

words which remind us of the dictum of the philosopher who is reported to have said, 'If I held all truth in my right hand, I would let forth only a ray at a time lest I should blind the world,' or of that other saying of the greatest Teacher of all, 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.'

As to the means by which one may convey truth to another, the poet asserts that for him 'Art' (using the word, I suppose, in its most comprehensive sense) 'remains the one way possible of speaking

[1] 'Development,' vol. ii. 766.

truth.' Common speech — intended to express facts, realities—often defeats its own object. The truth, reaching another thus, 'looks false, seems to be just the thing it would supplant':

> But Art,—wherein man nowise speaks to men,
> Only to mankind,—Art may tell a truth
> Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
> Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.[1]

The highest truth, however, is not conveyed to a man by any other human being, even though that other be an 'Artist.' The soul longs for something more than the most wealthy or the most gifted of its fellows can impart. The 'broken lights' of earth may make some revelation to him who is in darkness, but he will not be content unless he sees the Sun himself!—

> I thirst for truth,
> But shall not drink it till I reach the source.[2]

---

[1] 'The Ring and the Book' ('The Book and the Ring'), vol. ii. 291.

[2] Ibid. ('Giuseppe Caponsacchi'), vol. ii. 146.

There alone will the soul's thirst be quenched. In fellowship with Him, in contemplation of His character and His relationship to man, can we really come to know 'the truth,' and so to understand the full significance of the words of another great teacher of the last century, when he says, 'The first lesson of Christian life is this, Be true ; and the second this, Be true ; and the third this,—Be true.'

IX

CONCERNING LIFE

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CONCERNING LIFE

'The lesson that Browning taught us was to live this life bravely and nobly; to live human and not supernatural lives, because we were born men, and not angels; to live good and not wicked lives, because we were men, and not demons; not sensual lives, because we were men, and not beasts; to live bravely and nobly each day the life of to-day—to-day's life, and not to-morrow's, lest we should be visionaries; not yesterday's, lest we should be murmurers; to live the life of a good to-day, unwounded by the Parthian arrows of yesterday, and confident in the blessed hopes of to-morrow.'

FARRAR.

IN Dawson's *Makers of Modern English*[1] there is an interesting contrast drawn between Wordsworth and

[1] *Vide* pp. 279–80.

Tennyson on the one hand, and Browning on the other. The two former poets, says the author, dissimilar as they are in many respects, are alike in this, that 'they breathe the air of silence and seclusion. With the one, it is the silence of the mountains; with the other, the ordered calm of English rural life.' But with Browning it is entirely different. He 'has no touch of the recluse about him; he is the child of cities, not of solitudes. . . . He does not shun the crowd: he seeks and loves it. The sense of numbers quickens his imagination. The great drama of human life absorbs him. . . . It is life everywhere that moves him to utterance; and in the crowd of men, and in the tangled motives of men, and the constant dramas and tragedies bred by the passions and instincts of the human heart, Browning has found the food upon which his genius has thriven.'

In harmony with this, we are told by

Mrs. Sutherland Orr,[1] that 'when a friend once said to the poet, "You have not a great love for nature, have you?" he had replied, "Yes, I have, but I love men and women better"; and the admission (Mrs. Orr continues), which conveyed more than it literally expressed, would have been true, I believe, at any, up to the present, period of his history' (1877).

This being so, any student who seeks to discover Browning's detailed teaching concerning life in its numberless phases and aspects must needs go carefully through the whole of his poetry, learning each separate lesson as it is presented by the many characters whose motives and actions the poet so vividly portrays. Our object here, however, is not to enter into minute particulars, but rather to obtain a general view of his philosophy of life, to grasp a few great principles of which endless illustrations might easily be given.

[1] *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, p. 316.

Browning's basal conception of life is set forth with admirable precision by Professor Henry Jones,[1] where, classing him with Carlyle, he says, 'They were both witnesses to the presence of God in the spirit of man, and *looked at this life in the light of another and a higher*;[2] or rather they penetrated through the husk of time, and saw that eternity is even here a tranquil element underlying the noisy antagonisms of man's earthly life':

> Be assured, come what come will,
> What once lives never dies—what here attains
> To a beginning, has no end, still gains
> And never loses aught.[3]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Never dream
> That what once lived shall ever die![4]

Such a view as this determines the whole of the poet's thought in relation to the present, the life that is ours to-day.

[1] *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, p. 46.

[2] *The italics are mine.*

[3] 'Parleyings with certain People,' vol. ii. 723.

[4] Ibid., vol. ii. 729.

And if we ask what that thought is, the answer will be at least threefold.

I. He conceives of the present life as *a period of probation*, during which man's powers may be tested, and his future destiny shaped. Thus, in the words of the Pope:

> Life is probation and the earth no goal
> But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
> Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal.[1]

Not that the goal of which he speaks, or any goal, is final—not that any point is ever reached beyond which the soul that has been tried and proved cannot go.

Tennyson, at the age of eighty years, in lines whose personal note is surely of profoundest interest, exulting in what he has attained, nevertheless indicates what he still hopes for:

> I have climb'd to the snows of Age, and I gaze at a field in the Past,
> Where I sank with the body at times in the sloughs of a low desire,

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 235.

But I hear no yelp of the beast, and the Man is quiet at last
As he stands on the heights of his life with a glimpse of a height that is higher.[1]

Even so, Browning, in the beautiful poem, 'One Word More,' addressed to his wife, sees no limit to the possible development of his life:

I shall never, in the years remaining,
Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,
Make you music that should all-express me;
So it seems: I stand on my attainment.
This of verse alone, one life allows me;
Verse and nothing else have I to give you.
Other heights in other lives, God willing:[2]
All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love![3]

Still, the fact remains that in his view the present life is probationary in its character, and by it the character of the future will be determined:

Life's business being just the terrible choice.[4]

If we accept Dr. Westcott's characterization of 'Rabbi Ben Ezra,' when he says

[1] 'By an Evolutionist.' [2] *The italics are mine.*
[3] 'Men and Women' ('One Word More'), vol. i. 548.
[4] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 233.

that it is 'in epitome, a philosophy of life,' we shall see how Mrs. Sutherland Orr's description of this particular poem harmonizes with that conception of the poet with which we are now dealing. 'The most striking feature,' she says, 'of Rabbi Ben Ezra's philosophy is his estimate of age. According to him the soul is eternal, but it completes the first stage of its experience in the earthly life; and the climax of the earthly life is attained, not in the middle of it but at its close.'[1]

Precisely; and therefore we may appropriately apply one line of the poem itself to the retrospect and the prospect, when the close of the earthly existence is reached:

The Future I may face now I have proved the Past.[2]

II. A second aspect under which this life presented itself to Browning was that of *a period of education* — not in any

[1] *Handbook, &c.*, p. 203. [2] Vol. i. 582.

narrow sense of the word, of course, but with its widest possible significance.

When John Ruskin is writing on Education, one of the principal things that he demands 'should imperatively be taught' our boys and girls is this—'habits of gentleness and justice'; and, in supporting that demand, he says truthfully: 'Public schools, in which the aim was to form character faithfully, would return the children in due time to their parents worth more than their weight in gold.'

That was the lofty, comprehensive view of education which Browning cherished when he thought of the whole of man's career in this world under this particular aspect. 'Life means learning,' he says; but learning what? This:

> To abhor
> The false, and love the true, truth treasured snatch by snatch,
> Waifs counted at their worth. And when with strays they match
> I' the parti-coloured world,—when, under foul, shines fair,

And truth, displayed i' the point, flashes forth everywhere
I' the circle, manifest to soul, though hid from sense,
And no obstruction more affects this confidence,—
When faith is ripe for sight,—why, reasonably, then
Comes the great clearing-up. Wait threescore years and ten![1]

Or again:

Life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
Such prize despite the envy of the world,
And, having gained truth, keep truth: that is all.[2]

In Cardinal Newman's *Apologia* there occurs this strange but suggestive sentence: 'There will ever be a number of persons . . . too intellectual to be humble.' Such persons, Browning would have said, have, so far, frustrated the purpose of their life. And yet the words indicate to us a very common mistake and a very imminent peril. They remind us of a phrase of the poet himself, 'cultured, therefore sceptical.'

[1] 'Fifine at the Fair,' vol. ii. 352.
[2] 'A Death in the Desert,' vol. i. 587.

Not that he ever depreciated or underestimated intellectuality or culture, revealing as he did one of the master-intellects of the nineteenth century, and all his poetry in itself tending to the highest mental culture. He saw rather—and it is this that he emphasizes — the mischief that must ever accrue from exalting any one part of man's nature at the expense of another; saw, too, that 'the greatest men that ever lived are those in whom you cannot separate the mental and moral lives'; and so education meant for him the 'drawing out,' the cultivation, of *all* the powers, in the true etymological sense of the word:

> I count life just a stuff
> To try the soul's strength on, educe the man.
> Who keeps one end in view makes all things serve.[1]

III. But the third conception of life discoverable in Browning's poems, and perhaps more frequently seen than any other there, is that of *a period of conflict*, a time

[1] 'In a Balcony,' vol. i. 559.

of constant, unceasing struggle against adverse powers:

> As I looked on life,
> Still everywhere I tracked this, though it hid
> And shifted, lay so silent as it thought,
> Changed shape and hue yet ever was the same.
> Why, 'twas all fighting, all their nobler life!
> All work was fighting, every harm—defeat,
> And every joy obtained—a victory![1]

The poet discerns the inevitableness of this, on two grounds. First, man is out of harmony with *his surroundings*. A life free from strife would be a mean, ignoble thing—the life of a brute; and no true man desires that. He must antagonize the forces that are against him, must assert the dignity of his manhood in opposition to all that would rob him of it:

> And so I live, you see,
> Go through the world, try, prove, reject,
> Prefer, still struggling to effect
> My warfare; happy that I can
> Be crossed and thwarted as a man,
> Not left in God's contempt apart,
> With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart,
> Tame in earth's paddock as her prize.[2]

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[1] 'Luria,' vol. i. 457. [2] 'Easter Day,' vol. i. 507.

Then, further, man is out of harmony with *himself*. The elements of his nature contend one with another. Right and wrong find their chief battle-ground in his own heart; and, in the best lives, the struggle between the two is often the most intense:

> When the fight begins within himself,
> A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
> Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
> He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes
> And grows. Prolong that battle through his life![1]

Dr. Martineau gives us what he calls 'an exact definition of Right and Wrong,' in this form: 'Every action is *Right*, which, in presence of a lower principle, follows a higher: every action is *Wrong*, which, in presence of a higher principle, follows a lower.'[2]

It is impossible, I think, to take exception to that statement, and, if so, the

[1] 'Bishop Blougram's Apology,' vol. i. 537.
[2] *Types of Ethical Theory*, vol. ii. 270.

battle must of necessity be prolonged through life, inasmuch as that day will never dawn when the two principles, the higher and the lower, will not present themselves, in their essential antagonism, before the mind. And because Browning saw this so clearly, we can understand the spirit of exultation which reveals itself in his 'Prospice,' where we are shown how fear—the fear of death—is heroically met and vanquished and cast out of the soul by perfect love—love of truth and goodness, and of her who had gone before him into the silent land:

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,

And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest![1]

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[1] Vol. i. 599.

X

CONCERNING THE WORK OF LIFE

X

CONCERNING THE WORK OF LIFE

'The common problem, yours, mine, every one's,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be,—but, finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means: a very different thing!'

'Bishop Blougram's Apology.'

TO solve that problem and to realize the ideal which it brings before us will demand the exercise of all the thought and all the energy of which we are capable. The idle man will leave it without solution, and thus frustrate one of the

great purposes of his being. For it is not necessary, in order to defeat the main objects of life, that a man should be violent or even active in any measure in opposing the best that he knows. Neglect, indifference, a persistent pursuit of the policy of *laissez-faire*, will achieve the same end, and prevent the success, the goodness, the beauty, that are within the reach of the meanest and most obscure. And therefore it comes to pass that those who have seen most clearly the demands of the world and of the world's Maker, and at the same time have understood the tendencies and the temptations of human nature to turn aside from those demands, have preached most earnestly what has been called the Gospel of Work. Ruskin, for example, urges the necessity of strenuous effort upon all classes of the community. Repudiating the too common idea that the meaning of the word 'gentleman' is that of a man living in idleness on other

people's labour, he says: 'Gentlemen have to learn that it is no part of their duty or privilege to live on other people's toil. They have to learn that there is no degradation in the hardest manual or the humblest servile labour, when it is honest. But that there *is* degradation, and that deep, in extravagance, in bribery, in indolence, in pride, in taking places they are not fit for, or in coining places for which there is no need. . . . By far the greater part of the suffering and crime which exists at this moment in civilized Europe, arises simply from people not understanding this truism—not knowing that produce or wealth is eternally connected by the laws of heaven and earth with resolute labour; but hoping in some way to cheat or abrogate this everlasting law of life, and to feed where they have not furrowed, and be warm where they have not woven.'

Carlyle, too, in his own rugged fashion, and in words about which there can be

no mistake, drives home the same truth: 'And who art thou that braggest of thy life of idleness; complacently showest thy bright gilt equipages; sumptuous cushions; appliances for folding of the hands to mere sleep? Looking up, looking down, around, behind, or before, discernest thou, if it be not in Mayfair alone, any *idle* hero, saint, god, or even devil? Not a vestige of one. In the Heavens, in the Earth, in the Waters under the Earth, is none like unto thee. Thou art an original figure in this Creation; a denizen in Mayfair alone, in this extraordinary Century or Half-Century alone! One monster there is in the world: the idle man.'

It is impossible ever to think of these two together — Ruskin and Carlyle — as among the leading teachers of the last century, without associating with them in our minds our own poet also; and so, in regard to the work of life, its necessity, its value, the spirit in which it is to be

performed and the motives by which the worker should be actuated, Browning is not one whit behind his compeers. It is true that he may not present his views in precisely the same way as the others, for the simple reason that the sphere in which his genius operated would not admit of this; but it can never be said of him, as perhaps of some poets, that he was a visionary or a mere idealist, conjuring up before his readers the pictures fashioned by his own imagination, and nothing more. No. Whether it be paradoxical to say it or not, I have no hesitation in affirming that his *poetry* is intensely *practical*, and that in it suggestions (I had almost said *rules*) for life and for the work of life may easily be discovered.

Browning will not excuse an idle man anywhere. He is an anomaly. He is out of harmony with nature. The reason for his idleness is to be found in himself, in the poverty of his manhood — not in

his surroundings. Making due allowance for exceptional conditions, and speaking broadly—for the man who is willing to work the sphere is always open, there is always something to be achieved, ready to his hand:

> Wherever's will
> To do, there's plenty to be done, or ill
> Or good.[1]

The work itself may vary in its character, just as do the workers; but there is room for all, and all should strive together for the best ends, without envy or friction or jealousy. 'The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee; or, again, the hand to the feet, I have no need of you.' Foolish and futile discussion is sometimes carried on as to the relative value and importance of the work achieved by the mind and that performed by the body. If the brain workers sometimes look pitifully, not to say contemptu-

[1] 'Sordello,' vol. i. 193.

ously, on the great mass of those who toil with their hands, these toilers again sometimes retaliate by sneering at those who, in their judgement, contribute little or nothing that is worthy to the common good. Such an attitude and such estimates of these different classes have, according to Browning, no solid basis in fact. Incidentally, in 'The Ring and the Book,' he sweeps them aside with a few strong words, brings together the faculties of the mind and the body as being both equally real, and attributing to the former in their exercise a possible intensity and strenuousness *not less* than can ever be revealed in the latter:

> I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard.
> I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,
> Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close,
> As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar.[1]

And therefore, whether we find our task chiefly in the region of thought or

[1] 'Giuseppe Caponsacchi,' vol. ii. 129.

of matter, it must be done by us without hesitation, forthwith. We may not always have the power to choose our work; frequently it comes to us unsought, perhaps undesired. Inclination would sometimes lead us to refuse and spurn that which demands imperatively our attention and our effort. The artist, for instance, who is fascinated by ideals which he would fain realize, is sometimes, alas! compelled to paint pictures which to him are unworthy, and possibly to turn aside from his art altogether to fulfil some more pressing and urgent duty. Did not Carlyle say, 'Do the duty that is nearest thee —that first and that well; all the rest will disclose themselves with increasing clearness and make their successive demands'? And did not the Preacher of the Old Testament offer this sound advice: '*Whatsoever* thy hand *findeth to do*, do it with thy might'; adding, as a reason for its practical acceptance, 'for there is

no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest'?

Even so, Browning, catching the spirit of both the modern and the ancient sage, says:

> Listen!
> Knowing ourselves, our world, our task so great,
> Our time so brief, 'tis clear if we refuse
> The means so limited, the tools so rude
> To execute our purpose, life will fleet,
> And we shall fade, and leave our task undone.
> We will be wise in time: what though our work
> Be fashioned in despite of their ill-service,
> Be crippled every way? 'Twere little praise
> Did full resources wait on our goodwill
> At every turn. Let all be as it is.[1]

As to the character which our work should bear, Browning's teaching is clear beyond the shadow of a doubt. However menial the work itself may be, it must be done with the utmost possible efficiency. He will not countenance any shuffling, any inferior expedients for completing the task allotted, simply with a view to *getting through* it.

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 34.

> Our best is bad, nor bears Thy test;
> Still, it should be our very best.[1]

If it be not, then not only will that which is wrought be so far defective, but the possibilities of the future will be marred and spoiled. Our life is a unity. One flaw makes its influence felt everywhere, prevents the perfection of the whole—aye, more than that, hinders any true advancement towards perfection:

> If one step's awry, one bulge
> Calls for correction by a step we thought
> Got over long since, why, till that is wrought,
> No progress![2]

And, therefore, into every task one must put his whole soul. He must have *a mind* to work. Nothing must be done half-heartedly. The motto must ever be: 'With both hands earnestly.' The secret of success or failure is often explained by the presence or absence of this spirit, but, whatever be the possible issue of the

[1] 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day,' vol. i. 485.
[2] 'Sordello,' vol. i. 172.

work, the spirit itself must be there all the way through:

> Stake your counter as boldly every whit,
> Venture as warily, use the same skill,
> Do your best, whether winning or losing it,
> If you choose to play!—is my principle.
> Let a man contend to the uttermost
> For his life's set prize, be it what it will![1]

There is one truth in relation to life's work upon which Browning insists again and again, and which surely should be an infinite comfort to those whose powers are most limited and whose sphere is most circumscribed. It is suggested in many forms, but perhaps finds its best expression in one of the songs in 'Pippa Passes':

> All service ranks the same with God:
> If now, as formerly He trod
> Paradise, His presence fills
> Our earth, each only as God wills
> Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,
> Are we; there is no last nor first.
> Say not 'a small event!' Why 'small'?

[1] 'The Statue and the Bust,' vol. i. 434.

Costs it more pain that this, ye call
A 'great event,' should come to pass,
Than that? Untwine me from the mass
Of deeds which make up life, one deed
Power shall fall short in or exceed![1]

There are two reasons, at least, why one should hesitate to call his work 'great' or 'small'—why, especially, he should not be depressed by its seeming insignificance or poverty. One is that his proximity to his task and the effort of fulfilling it deprive him of the power to form a correct estimate of it:

It must oft fall out
That one whose labour perfects any work,
Shall rise from it with eye so worn that he
Of all men least can measure the extent
Of what he has accomplished.[2]

And the other reason why work—and here especially the work of others—cannot be truly characterized and appraised by us, is this—that the whole of the effort involved in it does not, cannot appear.

[1] Vol. i. 198. [2] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 41.

What of the impulse from which the effort grew, which may have been true or false, but which is always completely hidden away? How many unfair estimates of work are made, simply because we deal only with the visible product, without taking any account of its invisible origin and of the process by which it came to be! When we contemplate external phenomena and manifestations only, when we critically sort out the aspects of human character as objects of natural history, we find ourselves involved in endless intricacies of classification.[1] There are men who, as our poet says, 'serve God at the devil's bidding,'—what can you say of their service? Therefore

> Seek
> You virtuous people, motives![2]

And, until you have found them, cease to fasten your epithets upon human

[1] *Vide* Martineau's *Types of Ethical Theory*, vol. ii. 66.
[2] 'King Victor and King Charles,' vol. i. 235.

achievements, professing to determine their moral — that is, their real — value. It is beyond you. 'Judge nothing before the time until the Lord come, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and make manifest the counsels of the heart: and then shall each man have his praise from God.'

In George Eliot's *Stradivarius* there occur the following suggestive lines:

> *Stradivari speaks.* The masters only know whose work is good:
> They will choose mine; and, while God gives them skill,
> I give them instruments to play upon,
> God choosing me to help Him.
> *Naldo.* What! were God
> At fault for violins, thou absent?
> *Stradivari.* Yes;
> He were at fault for Stradivari's work.

That is one view of the work of life in its relation to God—He *needing us*, demanding that we become 'workers together with Him.' Another view—the complementary one — is that which recognizes

our need of Him. And, while both are undoubtedly acknowledged by Browning, it is the latter on which I think he lays the greater emphasis; as, for example, in the closing lines of 'Rabbi Ben Ezra':

> So, take and use Thy work:
> Amend what flaws may lurk,
> What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!
> My times be in Thy hand!
> Perfect the cup as planned!
> Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same![1]

There is a test of worth, to be applied rather to the worker than to the work, upon which the poet rightly lays much stress. It is this: *the power of continuance.* Men generally are often cheated by some meteoric blaze of light thrown over some spasmodic effort, which blaze soon dies away into deeper darkness than before. Frequently, a great short-lived luminosity is preferred to a lesser steady, enduring light, that shines more and more unto the

[1] Vol. i. 583.

perfect day. Not so is it with him who sees beneath the surface, penetrating to the very heart of things. He is not thus deceived by appearances:

> Now, observe,
> Sustaining is no brilliant self-display
> Like knocking down or even setting up:
> Much bustle these necessitate; and still
> To vulgar eye, the mightier of the myth
> Is Hercules, who substitutes his own
> For Atlas' shoulder and supports the globe
> A whole day,—not the passive and obscure
> Atlas who bore, ere Hercules was born,
> And is to go on bearing that same load
> When Hercules turns ash on Œta's top.
> 'Tis the transition-stage, the tug and strain,
> That strike men: standing still is stupid-like.[1]

And then the work of such men—'men of continuance'—abides:

> 'No work begun shall ever pause for death!'[2]

Even when it is superseded by other work, its effects endure. Without it that other work would have been impossible. The building, if it be really of 'gold,

[1] 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society,' vol. ii. 301.

[2] 'The Ring and the Book' ('Pompilia'), vol. ii. 172.

silver, and precious stones,' is not destroyed. It becomes rather in due course the foundation on which the new superstructure is reared. Is not that the meaning of the somewhat difficult lines in 'Aristophanes' Apology'?—

> And what's my teaching but—accept the old,
> Contest the strange! acknowledge work that's done,
> Misdoubt men who have still their work to do!
> Religions, laws and customs, poetries,
> Are old? So much achieved victorious truth!
> Each work was product of a lifetime, wrung
> From each man by an adverse world: for why?
> He worked, destroying other older work
> Which the world loved and so was loth to lose.
> Whom the world beat in battle—dust and ash!
> Who beat the world, left work in evidence,
> And wears its crown till new men live new lives,
> And fight new fights, and triumph in their turn.[1]

That for the work, and for the worker this:

> Still you pursue
> The ungracious path as though 't were rosy-strewn.
> 'Tis well: and your reward, or soon or late,
> Will come from Him whom no man serves in vain.[2]

The substance of all that has been said in this chapter is given us in two fine

[1] Vol. i. 702. [2] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 44.

passages, in poems widely separated in point of time, but each passage embodying the same noble thoughts and sentiments. One is in 'Paracelsus':

> I have performed my share of the task:
> The rest is God's concern; mine, merely this,
> To know that I have obstinately held
> By my own work. The mortal whose brave foot
> Has trod, unscathed, the temple-court so far
> That he descries at length the shrine of shrines,
> Must let no sneering of the demons' eyes,
> Whom he could pass unquailing, fasten now
> Upon him, fairly past their power; no, no—
> He must not stagger, faint, fall down at last,
> Having a charm to baffle them; behold,
> He bares his front: a mortal ventures thus
> Serene amid the echoes, beams and glooms!
> If he be priest henceforth, if he wake up
> The god of the place to ban and blast him there,
> Both well! What's failure or success to me?
> I have subdued my life to the one purpose
> Whereto I ordained it; there alone I spy,
> No doubt, that way I may be satisfied.[1]

And the other is in 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,' where he says he used his 'special stock of power':

> All regulated by the single care
> I' the last resort—that I made thoroughly serve

[1] Vol. i. 29.

Concerning the Work of Life

The when and how, toiled where was need, reposed
As resolutely at the proper point,
Braved sorrow, courted joy, to just one end:
Namely, that just the creature I was bound
To be, I should become, nor thwart at all
God's purpose in creation. I conceive
No other duty possible to man,—
Highest mind, lowest mind, no other law
By which to judge life failure or success:
What folk call being saved or cast away.
Such was my rule of life: I worked my best
Subject to ultimate judgement, God's not man's.[1]

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[1] Vol. ii. 295.

XI

CONCERNING DEATH

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CONCERNING DEATH

'If death is only death, life is a cruelty, and hope but irony.' LUTHARDT.

'The face of death is toward the Sun of Life,
His shadow darkens earth: his truer name
Is Onward.' TENNYSON.

IT is impossible for any one to say that Browning was morbid either in his tastes or in his views of men and things. All that we know of him gives us the impression of a wonderful healthfulness of mind. Carlyle was so struck with this that he regarded it as 'a very strange and curious spectacle to behold a man in these days so confidently cheerful.'

The reason for that is not to be found

in the suggestion that the poet must have ignored some of the essential facts of life, for, indeed, such a suggestion has in it no element of truth. On the contrary, it was the comprehensiveness of his vision that accounted for the buoyancy of his spirit. He saw the worst, but he saw it always in conjunction with the best. The shadows which fell across his pathway only made him more certain of the light without which they could not have been. For him there was no such thing as unrelieved darkness. And this being so, we are not able to study his view of death—the valley of deepest shadow—apart from the light which shines on the hills on the other side.

Glimpses of that light we shall see in the next chapter; and what I propose to do in this is simply to bring before the reader a few fragmentary thoughts concerning death itself, couched in such language as only a poet like Browning could

use. Take these half-dozen lines from 'Balaustion's Adventure' by way of illustration:

> Here comes Death
> Close on us of a sudden! who, pale priest
> Of the mute people, means to bear his prey
> To the house of Hades. The symmetric step!
> How he treads true to time and place and thing,
> Dogging day, hour and minute, for death's due![1]

The inevitableness of the 'priest's' coming; the silence of the people in his dread presence—reminding one of the Psalmist's words, 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth'; the penalty which all mortals have thus to pay, that penalty ever threatening, and then exacted in due course as if it were a mere piece of business and no pain could be occasioned thereby,—all these things are here hinted at or explicitly stated, in words appropriate to the terrible theme.

Death Universal.

Of the universality of death, the words

[1] Vol. i. 632.

which Browning puts into the mouth of the murderer, Guido, give us a picture which, in its vividness and its intensity, has perhaps never been surpassed. It is true that the wretched criminal as he draws near the end, and as the mask is torn from his face, tells us that in all he had said he had 'laughed and mocked,' but even in his laughter and mockery he has uttered in a weird fashion an indisputable truth. Addressing all who would hear him, in his fury, he says, as if he and they alike were bound by a fate from which there was no escape:

I see you all reel to the rock, you waves—
Some forthright, some describe a sinuous track,
Some, crested brilliantly, with heads above,
Some in a strangled swirl sunk who knows how,
But all bound whither the main-current sets,
Rockward, an end in foam for all of you!
What if I be o'ertaken, pushed to the front
By all you crowding smoother souls behind,
And reach, a minute sooner than was meant,
The boundary whereon I break to mist?
Go to! the smoothest safest of you all,
Most perfect and compact wave in my train,
Spite of the blue tranquillity above,

Concerning Death

Spite of the breadth before of lapsing peace,
Where broods the halcyon and the fish leaps free,
Will presently begin to feel the prick
At lazy heart, the push at torpid brain,
Will rock vertiginously in turn, and reel,
And, emulative, rush to death like me.[1]

There have been, and still are, two types of men who recognize that, under certain conditions, death is preferable to continued life in this world. The one is a coward, or perchance a maniac, who under pressure of great trouble, which has proved too much for his brain or his heart, has had recourse to suicide as the best method of deliverance from his ills. The other is the Christian thinker, who, seeing that life is a sacred trust to be jealously guarded and used for the noblest ends, nevertheless believes that death itself would be easier to bear than some oppressive loads which might be laid upon him. It is needless to say that the latter type is one which our poet

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 278.

understood and appreciated to the full. Though to him life was replete with charm and hope, he could sympathize with those who were weighted and weary with woes which crushed them down to earth. Is not that evident in the pathetic lines in 'A Soul's Tragedy,' where Eulalia, one of the subordinate characters in the drama, speaks?—

> We are to die; but even I perceive
> 'Tis not a very hard thing so to die.
> My cousin of the pale-blue tearful eyes,
> Poor Cesca, suffers more from one day's life
> With the stern husband; Tisbe's heart goes forth
> Each evening after that wild son of hers,
> To track his thoughtless footstep through the streets:
> How easy for them both to die like this!
> I am not sure that I could live as they.[1]

Death a Leveller.

Perhaps there is nothing that so brings home to us the oneness of the human race as the common fate of all men. In

[1] Vol. i. 470.

life, try as we may to efface distinctions between one grade of society and another, those distinctions will persist, and will declare themselves in spite of our efforts to get rid of them. In Church life, in the presence of God Himself, before whom all are equal, the inequalities unfortunately often make themselves felt; in experiences of sorrow, even if occasioned by the same means, the peer and the peasant manage to keep themselves apart, though under such circumstances it might be thought there would be some sort of commingling. Between the brilliant genius and the feeble intellect, between the leaders and the followers, between masters and servants (even when they congregate in one place and share many of the same privileges), there are, as it seems, great gulfs fixed. But, when the end comes, who can resist the conviction that *there*, as never before, 'the rich and poor meet together,' and that

many of the distinctions previously maintained were not only ephemeral but superficial and accidental also, and therefore destined to pass away? And because of this, no words are needed to point out the intense humanness of the words of Paracelsus:

> Dear Festus, lay me,
> When I shall die, within some narrow grave,
> Not by itself—for that would be too proud—
> But where such graves are thickest; let it look
> Nowise distinguished from the hillocks round,
> So that the peasant at his brother's bed
> May tread upon my own and know it not;
> And we shall all be equal at the last,
> Or classed according to life's natural ranks,
> Fathers, sons, brothers, friends—not rich, nor wise,
> Nor gifted: lay me thus, then say . . .
> . . . 'So here at least he is a man.'[1]

Is it not the sense of all this that leads us tacitly to assent to the maxim that nothing but good is to be spoken of the dead? 'I, too, shall come to that at last. Let me act towards him as I would that others should act towards me in like case.'

[1] Vol. i. 65.

The dead man is praised on his journey—'Bear, bear him along
With his few faults shut up like dead flowerets.'[1]

Death gives Significance to Life.

From the thought above expressed, it is easy to pass to the reflection that death, in itself, is not wholly an evil. From the Christian standpoint, that is of course readily acknowledged. *Mors janua vitae est.* It is not the end of existence, but the entrance to a higher existence still.

But, apart altogether from this, the fact that death lies before us invests this life with a meaning which it could not otherwise possess. Here, again, the wild excited criminal, Guido, uttering profound truths, in spite of his 'madness,' and in face of his doom, may be our teacher:

You never know what life means till you die:
Even throughout life, 'tis death that makes life live,
Gives it whatever the significance.
For see, on your own ground and argument,

[1] 'Saul,' vol. i. 274.

Suppose life had no death to fear, how find
A possibility of nobleness
In man, prevented daring any more?
What's love, what's faith without a worst to dread?
Lack-lustre jewelry! but faith and love
With death behind them bidding do or die—
Put such a foil at back, the sparkle's born![1]

'The Soul's Awakening.'

Many of my readers have doubtless seen either the original picture, or a copy of it, bearing this title. They will remember its salient features. A girl face, pure and beautiful, with eyes upturned, with no rapturous gaze, but with a look of intensity, indicative partly of wonder, partly of a profound peace, because into the spirit which looks out through those lustrous eyes there has come for the first time a just conception of the true meaning of life. That is one awakening of the human soul.

Browning, as we saw in a previous chapter, has depicted another. It is that

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 278.

which is suggested incidentally in these lines from 'The Inn Album':

> In every love, or soon or late
> Soul must awake and seek out soul for soul.[1]

If a Christian minister, or any teacher of the Christian religion, were asked what *he* understood by the soul's awakening, he would probably answer in one word—Conversion. And, strikingly enough, one of the most recent writers on Browning has gone so far as to say: 'I regard Browning's teaching on conversion as his supreme message to our time.' This teaching he elaborates in a chapter bearing the significant title, 'The Soul's Leap to God.'[2]

But, beyond all these, there is another awakening of the human spirit to which our poet has directed attention. In one of his romantic poems, 'The Flight of

[1] Vol. ii. 456.

[2] Vide *Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith*, by J. A. Hutton, p. 49.

the Duchess,' there is recounted the story of a young girl who was brought out of a convent to marry a certain Duke, and who afterwards fled from him and fell under the influence of a gipsy. The gipsy tells her how good a thing love is, how beautiful an existence is theirs whom it has welded together, and how restful their old age may be with its 'hoarded memories':

> And then as, 'mid the dark, a gleam
> Of yet another morning breaks,
> And like the hand which ends a dream,
> Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
> Touches the flesh and the soul awakes.[1]

Nothing more needed to be said, and the voice was lost in music.

A kindred thought to this, which may well serve as a connecting link between the present chapter and the next, is to be found in the poem, 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers.' This is a real-life drama, with the poet's own

[1] Vol. i. 421.

reflections and interpretations of possible mental states. One of the chief actors in it is Clara Muhlhausen, the wife-mistress of Léonce Miranda, and when, after his death, she has established her right to the usufruct of Clairvaux, Browning says of her:

> She was lady there for life:
> And, after life—I hope, a white success
> Of some sort, wheresoever life resume
> School interrupted by vacation—death.[1]

Does death end all? YES and No! The education here *is* terminated, but after the vacation — a pretty fancy — it begins again in another sphere.

[1] Vol. ii. 424.

XII

CONCERNING IMMORTALITY

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'If I were asked—What is the central and controlling idea in Mr. Browning's system of thought? . . . my answer would be this—That man here on earth, in a state of preparation for other lives, and surrounded by wondrous spiritual influences, is too great for the sphere that contains him, while, at the same time, he can exist only by submitting for the present to the conditions it imposes, never without fatal loss becoming content with such submission, or regarding those conditions as final. Our nature here is unfinished, imperfect, but its glory, its peculiarity, that which makes us men—not God and not brutes—lies in this very character of imperfection, giving scope,

as it does, for indefinite growth and progress—

> **Progress, man's distinction mark alone,**
> **Not God's and not the brutes'; God is, they are,**
> **Man partly is, and wholly hopes to be.'**
>
> **Ed. Dowden.**

THE continuation of life—after death—is a subject of perennial interest to us all. It is true that there are some periods and some circumstances in which that interest is intensified until it may be said to be abnormal. In the dark hour of bereavement, and at the prospect of his own decease, it becomes of infinite moment to any man to know whether or not death ends all. In Amiel's *Journal* he tells how he went to hear Ernest Naville lecture on *The Eternal Life*. 'The great room of the Casino was full to the doors, and *one saw a fairly large number of white heads*.'[1] Is not that profoundly suggestive?

[1] *The italics are mine.*

But, apart altogether from special reasons which compel attention to this important theme, man's nature and his general surroundings lead him always to look with absorbing concern to the secret which Death holds in his unrelenting grasp. One of the most popular poems of the last century—which, indeed, has not lost, nor is likely to lose, its popularity—despite the vein of melancholy that runs through it, was Tennyson's 'In Memoriam.' Why? Not because of the elegance of its diction, not because of the exquisite beauty of many of the figures it contains, not because there are in it so many quotable lines, not even because of the personal note which constantly reveals itself and which is always attractive to the reader. No. The reason for the hold which that magnificent outburst of song had, and still has, on the public mind and heart is to be found in its discussion, from so many

points of view, of life and death in their relation to the great hereafter.

And what has just been said of Tennyson's immortal poem is true also, as accounting for the popularity, in a very much lesser degree, of Wordsworth's 'Ode' having reference to the same momentous theme.

It was not possible, therefore, that Browning should ignore such a subject as this—not possible that it should have only a small place in his writings. All Browning students will know how his own belief in the continuance of life—untouched by death—pervades his works, and makes itself felt in the most unmistakable fashion. The phrase which occurs in the wonderful description of Death, put into the lips of the dying Paracelsus, is significant of the poet's whole conception of the future:

> My foot is on the threshold
> Of boundless life.[1]

[1] Vol. i. 67.

The theory of annihilation or of natural extinction has no place here. It is not for one moment taken into account as worthy of serious thought. It is an article of his faith, that

> Life
> Being done with here, begins i' the world away.[1]

It would not, I think, be difficult to show that the basis of Browning's belief in immortality was the Scriptures, and especially the revelation of the future by Jesus Christ. He would subscribe to the pregnant saying of St. Paul: 'If Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain' (1 Cor. xv. 14, R.V.). But premising that, taking it for granted, we may also affirm that he found his chief argument for life hereafter in the imperfection of man's life here.

Emerson, as readers of his *Essays*[2] will remember, tells us that 'we must infer our

[1] 'The Ring and the Book,' vol. ii. 252.
[2] *The Works of Emerson*, p. 501.

destiny from the preparation,' and that 'the implanting of a desire indicates that the gratification of that desire is in the constitution of the creature that feels it.' His strong point is, that man's longing for immortality is God's voice in the soul, and 'the Creator keeps His word with us.'

Browning's position, though somewhat akin to this, is, at the same time, quite distinct from it. Both reason from man's nature, but, in the one case, it is from what is present in it, in the other from what is absent from it. Emerson says that we carry the pledge of the continuance of our being in our own breast. Browning says that because there is so much wanting in this life, therefore there must be another life to supply the defect.

> It is our trust
> That there is yet another world to mend
> All error and mischance.[1]
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Truly there needs another life to come!

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 50.

Concerning Immortality

If this be all—(I must tell Festus that)
And other life await us not—for one,
I say 'tis a poor cheat, a stupid bungle,
A wretched failure. I, for one, protest
Against it, and I hurl it back with scorn.[1]

In the year 1877, Browning, with his sister and a lady friend, spent part of the summer in a villa among the mountains of Geneva. On the night of the 14th of September the friend died suddenly of heart disease. In November of that year the poet produced 'La Saisiaz,' a poem inspired by the tragic occurrence; and in it the question is dealt with: Is death the *final* termination of life? Was he cleaving to a 'fact' or cherishing a 'fancy' when he anticipated meeting his departed friend again, and meeting also her who was to him dearest of all? And, in order to solve the problem thus presented, in order to answer the question satisfactorily, he postulates two facts—two only—God and the Soul, and from these proceeds to build

[1] 'Paracelsus,' vol. i. 64.

up his conception of the present life as merely a state of probation for a future, in which, as he trusts, things will be unperplexed, and the right and wrong now tangled will be unravelled. 'FANCY'—that is, the instinct of the soul — and 'REASON' argue together in relation to the subject. One 'thrusts, and the other 'parries' those thrusts, but the SOUL takes the prize of the contest, which is the hope, the belief, amounting to a certainty, that itself can never be quenched by 'deathly mists,' and that on the character of this life depends gain or loss for the next—heaven or hell.

In 'Old Pictures in Florence' the same truth is expressed under an entirely different form. While the poem contains a combination of humorous and serious reflections on the old masters and their works, the first purpose of it would seem to be to show the progressiveness of Art, the impossibility of ever reaching a final

stage in the revelation of mind and soul which the greatest pictures contain. And then the poet in his monologue, advancing from one stage to another, looks away beyond the present, and gives us a suggestion of his own view, in the line:

Things learned on earth, we shall practise in heaven.[1]

There is, however, another aspect of the future of which he is enamoured, and which he would fain portray, namely, that of cessation from the toils of earth. Hence, in the following verses, both phases are put before us side by side:

There 's a fancy some lean to and others hate—
  That when this life is ended, begins
New work for the soul in another state,
  Where it strives and gets weary, loses and wins:
Where the strong and the weak, this world's con-
    geries,
  Repeat in large what they practised in small,
Through life after life in unlimited series;
  Only the scale 's to be changed, that 's all.
Yet I hardly know. When a soul has seen
  By the means of Evil that Good is best,

[1] Vol. i. 269.

And, through earth and its noise, what is heaven's serene,—
When our faith in the same has stood the test—
Why, the child grown man, you burn the rod,
The uses of labour are surely done;
There remaineth a rest for the people of God:
And I have had troubles enough, for one.[1]

But are these two views entirely inharmonious or incongruous? Are they mutually exclusive? May there not be a sense in which the living dead 'rest from their *labours*'—the excessive and exhausting efforts of earth—while 'their *works* follow with them,' to be continued and perfected in that other sphere? But, whether that be so or not, what the poet in either case would have us see is that the future is a continuation of the present—on a higher level, in an ampler air, and surely with less to fetter or restrain.

Browning does not hesitate to tell us that it is this faith in immortality that gives to man his true glory. Without it

[1] 'Old Pictures in Florence,' vol. i. 270.

he would be little better than the beasts that perish. With it he is raised above them, and separated from them by a gulf which no bridge can ever span. It is worth while to contrast our poet's teaching with that of a leading Continental scientist, whose philosophy, we may say in passing, is so hopelessly illogical and absurd that it is scarcely worth a moment's attention, but who is quoted by some as if he were an indubitable authority on the deepest facts of the spiritual world. These are the words of Haeckel: 'The best we can desire after a courageous life, spent in doing good according to our light, is the eternal peace of the grave.'[1]

What would Browning say of this? 'A Grammarian's Funeral' is, I think, the best answer to the question:

> This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
> Dies ere he knows it.

---

[1] *The Riddle of the Universe*, p. 74

And is that the end of him?—

> Others mistrust and say, 'But time escapes:
> Live now or never!'
> He said, 'What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!
> Man has Forever.'[1]

If Haeckel is content to be as a dog or an ape, there is nothing to prevent him; but for ourselves we prefer to be men, with all that our manhood involves, not only in this world but also in the world to come.

From what has been already said, it follows that the life beyond is as real as —or more real than—the life here. The question raised by Milton:[2]

> What if earth
> Be but the shadow of heav'n; and things therein
> Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?

Browning does not hesitate to answer in the most positive, affirmative fashion:

[1] Vol. i. 425.
[2] *Paradise Lost*, p. 192 (Chandos Classics).

'There is Heaven,' he says, 'since there is Heaven's simulation—earth.'[1]

Readers of Shakespeare will recall the familiar lines in which he makes Prospero say, in *The Tempest*:

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

In Browning's 'Easter Day' that same metaphor is used with a somewhat different application, and with even a truer and more extended significance:

> From repose
> We shall start up, at last awake
> From life, that insane dream we take
> For waking now, because it seems.[2]

There is yet one other illustration of the higher character of the life immortal to which I will refer. It is from 'Sordello.' But there the superiority of that life is suggested to us under an altogether different figure, namely, that of climate.

[1] 'The Inn Album,' vol. ii. 451. [2] Vol. i. 501.

Dwellers in this life are depicted as doing their work in depressing surroundings, in unwholesome fog and damp: those who have passed hence have resumed their toil in the brightness, and amid the balmy air, of a cloudless and unending day:

> We die: which means to say, the whole's removed,
> Dismounted wheel by wheel, this complex gin,—
> To be set up anew elsewhere, begin
> A task indeed, but with a clearer clime
> Than the murk lodgement of our building-time.[1]

That, then, is the poet's prospect, and sometimes it is wellnigh overwhelming in its radiance, and baffles even his loftiest thought. In one of the dramatic love-poems, 'By the Fireside,' that is indicated to us with beautiful simplicity and naturalness. This poem, notwithstanding its dramatic form, has running through it a deep personal note, and we can hardly be wrong in declaring that it enshrines the memory of Mrs. Browning.

[1] Vol. i. 152–3.

The lover who speaks goes back from middle age to youth, recalls the first confession of his love, dwells fondly on his 'perfect wife,' lingers over the years of happiness they had spent together—in comparison with which even youth had seemed a waste—and then anticipates the time when the two souls, that for so long had been one, will see the vision of the day of God:

> Think, when our one soul understands
> The great Word which makes all things new,
> When earth breaks up and heaven expands,
> How will the change strike me and you
> In the house not made with hands?[1]

That, of course, is suggestive of mystery, and, when all is said of the life within the veil, the mystery must in greater or less degree remain. But mystery does not mean darkness. It *may* mean only excess of light. That the light *is*, we are sure, but we cannot see

[1] Vol. i. 283.

all that the light will by-and-by reveal. It is our own limitations that prevent us from knowing as we are known, that cause us to see through a glass, darkly.

But, in spite of this, what exuberant confidence in the future there is in the poet's soul! How he rejoices in a sure and certain hope of a resurrection to everlasting life—a hope which for him gilds the present with its glory, and makes all earthly joys tenfold greater than they could otherwise be!—

> Have you found your life distasteful?
> My life did, and does, smack sweet.
> Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?
> Mine I saved and hold complete.
> Do your joys with age diminish?
> When mine fail me, I'll complain.
> Must in death your daylight finish?
> My sun sets to rise again.[1]

[1] 'At the Mermaid,' vol. ii. 478.

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